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# DIABLO IV

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RPGs RETURNS – AND IT'S  
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FUTURE

ISSUE 383



### PC AUDIO SYSTEMS

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### TT IOM: RIDE ON THE EDGE 3

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# "WE'RE WORSHIPPING AT THE ALTAR OF DIABLO ONCE MORE"



Arguably, *Diablo* as a series lost its edge in its third incarnation. Yes, the elite loot cycle that propelled us through the previous two titles was there still, but the lighter art style, tone and atmosphere felt as if Blizzard had lost its faith in what made *Diablo* a PC gaming mega hit.

*Diablo IV*, though, sees Blizzard not just return to the

series' roots tonally, but also delivers a radical expansion to what *Diablo* offers as a game. We've played it, got exclusive dev access, and you can read why we're worshipping at the altar of *Diablo* once more on page 38.

**ROBERT JONES**Twitter  
@rnicolasj**This month**

Slew demonic hordes within the walls of PC Gamer Towers. Oh, and also played *Diablo IV*.

**ROBERT JONES**  
**PRINT EDITOR**

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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**SEE p44**

## The PC Gamer team

**ROBIN VALENTINE**Twitter  
@robinvalentine**This month**

Pinched a seriously impressive shotgun from an Ultramarine. It's loud, oh so very, very loud.

**TYLER COLP**Twitter  
@tylercolp**This month**

Got stuck in a messy divorce battle between Lilith and Inarius. Went to McDonald's for nugs.

**RICH STANTON**Twitter  
@RichJStanton**This month**

Shot hundreds of zombies in the head, shoulders, knees and toes.

**JODY MACGREGOR**Twitter  
@jodymacgregor**This month**

Spent the month communing with ghosts in seemingly innocuous locations.

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# MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



## COUNTER-STRIKE KILLER

Valve teased the Counter-Strike community... and surprised everyone with **COUNTER-STRIKE 2**

**A**fter weeks of teasing Valve has announced *Counter-Strike 2*, the newest iteration of what some consider the greatest and most popular competitive FPS in history. Yes, it's technically not the second *Counter-Strike* game, but the number feels like a statement of intent: this is the foundation for the next decade of *Counter-Strike* players and the esports scene).

And on first sight you may well wonder what the big deal is. Valve says, "*Counter-Strike 2* is an overhaul to every system, every piece of

All *CS:GO* skins transfer over and "all benefit from Source 2 lighting and materials", as well as the stock weapons having new, high-resolution models.

content, and every part of the CS experience," but it looks, and plays, an awful lot like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. The big changes are technological, with the most eye-catching being the new smoke grenades: the billowing smoke they create now reacts to things like bullets and grenades. Once you've

**"AN OVERHAUL TO EVERY SYSTEM, EVERY PIECE OF CONTENT"**

seen a smoke cloud dispersed by an explosion, it's hard to go back.

In the wider industry context, where the bigger FPS games constantly receive updates and new content, this is a seriously brassy move by Valve. It's made essentially the same game, but better, with a major focus on improving the backend and series continuity. The former is exemplified by a new 'sub-tick' system that goes beyond what players were asking for in terms of responsiveness, with Valve claiming servers will now "know the exact instant that motion starts, a shot is fired, or a 'nade is thrown. As a result, regardless of tick rate, your



ROGUE WON

## DIABLO IV BOSSED



During the *Diablo IV* open beta, a rogue almost soloed the world boss, Ashava, not once but twice. The glory was stolen at the very last minute as necromancers (yes, both times) joined the fight when the boss had just 1% health left, preventing him from claiming the solo victory. ■ **SJ**

RAISED BROWS

## THE WORST OF US



We can finally play *The Last of Us* after Naughty Dog's port of its PS5 remake. The problem? The game is broken. Besides crashes, bugs are making characters levitate, giving them eyebrows worthy of a Soviet premier, or just gradually, inexplicably, making them soaking wet in cutscenes. ■ **JW**

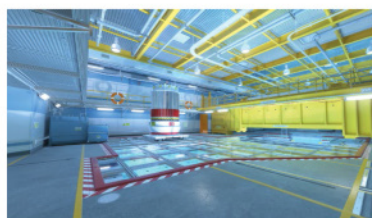
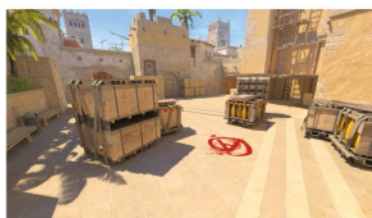


PROCESS THAT

## CAUGHT SMUGGLING



Stunned workers at China's Gongbei Port noticed a man with an oddly oblong looking midriff heading through customs, only to discover 239 packed up CPUs strapped to the man's body. The haul included Intel's latest 13th-gen Core i5 13400F, putting the potential price of the haul close to around \$50,000. ■ **KW**



Amusingly enough, the limited test selects players who spend a lot of time in *CS:GO*, but excludes anyone who's previously been punished for cheating or griefing.

moving and shooting will be equally responsive and your grenades will always land the same way".

As for series continuity, perhaps the biggest aspect of the announcement is that all of *CS:GO*'s skins will transfer for *Counter-Strike 2*.

### POPULAR MECHANICS

Skins weren't the only thing booming. *Counter-Strike 2* will launch in summer but is currently in a limited test period, with around 3% of the playerbase able to try out competitive *Dust 2*, and a range of other maps in casual mode. The spike in interest saw *CS:GO*'s playercount rocket to 1,519,457 concurrents in late March, the game's all-time record, while Valve has announced that the next Paris Major will be the last for *CS:GO*.

Then we come to the kicker: *Counter-Strike 2* is free. This game was always going to be huge but keeping the free-to-play model adopted by *CS:GO* in its latter years pretty much guarantees that its popularity will continue.

The *Counter-Strike 2* limited test is ongoing now and this game feels an awful lot like classic *Counter-Strike*, but better than ever. *Counter-Strike 2* is real, it's (almost) here, and it's beautiful. The king of competitive shooters is dead: long live the king. ■

**Rich Stanton**

## Highs & Lows



### HIGHS

#### I Me Mine

Old-school *Runescape*'s getting its first new skill in 17 years.

#### Fragile Masculinity

Former *Sims* lead Rod Humble says playtesters often lie, with young guys boasting of sordid exploits.

#### Tax Loss

*Tax Heaven 3000*, a dating sim about doing taxes (really), was removed from Steam over data concerns.

### E3's demise

This year's E3 event has been cancelled, and it looks likely to be the end of the event.

#### Beta be back

Warner Bros is withdrawing *Multiversus*, but plans to re-release it in 2024.

#### Ada Wrong

Various idiots harassed the new voice actor for *RE4*'s Ada. Grow up.

### LOWS





# The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

**T**he Spy has been hit hard by the death of E3. Sure, it was loud and annoying, and its position on the calendar lined up so poorly with PC Gamer's own publishing schedule that it would spoil any rumours The Spy had unearthed. But still, it was a remarkable and accurate reflection of the industry in all its gaudy excess and corporate despair.

In the context of the E3 show floor, surrounded by the pomp and spectacle of the industry, rumour and speculation felt alive – a thrilling, illicit thing that danced between booths, making you believe, no matter how unlikely the source. And now it's just gone. Maybe The Spy can replicate the feel by blasting hyperactive technopop at volumes that approach a human rights violation. Surely that's the spark needed to get The Spy hyped up for recent reports that Valve is working on a new, unannounced title.

Information about Valve's unannounced game comes courtesy of a LinkedIn profile of a former level designer at the studio. "Created a variety of prototypes with my team focused on ambitious, never-before seen gameplay for an unannounced project," reads the profile. "Developed AI, player mechanics, and puzzles from scratch." Buoyed by the sonic gutpunch of Blinding Lights by The Weeknd, The Spy starts to experience something approaching rapturous enthusiasm. But the moment quickly

fades when The Spy realises that Valve is likely sitting on hundreds of prototypes – ideas for games that will never happen, because, at some point, everyone working on them just wheeled their desk away to the bit that's making smoke grenades for *Counter-Strike 2*.

Were E3 actually happening, The Spy could stalk former Valve employees across the halls, listening for scraps of information about life at the notoriously secretive Seattle studio. Instead The Spy can do the next best thing: speculate about what's going on.

It's been a weird decade for Valve. *Artifact* and *Dota Underlords* failed to take off, and even *Half-Life: Alyx*, good as it is, was hamstrung by being tied to a VR platform. Much of the studio's low output seems to be down to issues with Source 2. Back in early 2021, former Valve employee Richard Geldrich put it simply in a now deleted tweet, "Source 2, 10 years ago, was a total hellscape." Months later, in a reply that's still live on Twitter, he doubled down on that train of thought, "Never have I seen a codebase or team invoke so much private rage and outright hatred in so many developers. It really was that bad."

## THE SOURCE WALL

According to Geoff Keighley's *The Final Hours of Half-Life: Alyx*, both *Half-Life 3* and *Left 4 Dead 3* were cancelled because of the state of Source 2 at the time. Other projects were shelved simply because they never got past the conceptual stage, or because other projects took priority. While *Alyx* and *Counter-Strike 2* might signal a shift in Source 2's viability, it remains true that just because a prototype was made, there's still no guarantee that it will ever become a released game.

Maybe it's the mood lighting talking, but perhaps Valve is the opposite of E3: quiet, sporadic, and – thanks to *Counter-Strike 2* – actually doing something this year. Spy out. ■  
*The Spy*



**THE SPY**  
The Spy suddenly has a free week in June.

## WERE E3 HAPPENING, THE SPY COULD STALK FORMER VALVE EMPLOYEES

## This month in... 2013



**1** The original *Company of Heroes* was one of the most critically acclaimed RTS games ever. The sequel takes a different tone: downplaying 'heroism' in favour of a stark look at the reality of the Eastern Front. "The Soviets are no heroes," *CoH2*'s game director admits in our cover story. A great game, but the backlash from Russian players was fierce.

**ISSUE**  
253, June 2013  
**ON THE COVER**  
*Company of Heroes 2*  
**IN THE CINEMAS**  
*Iron Man 3*

**2** "When it's all working perfectly, *Metro: Last Light* assembles a forlorn and beautiful world," writes Marsh Davies, awarding it 80% in our review.

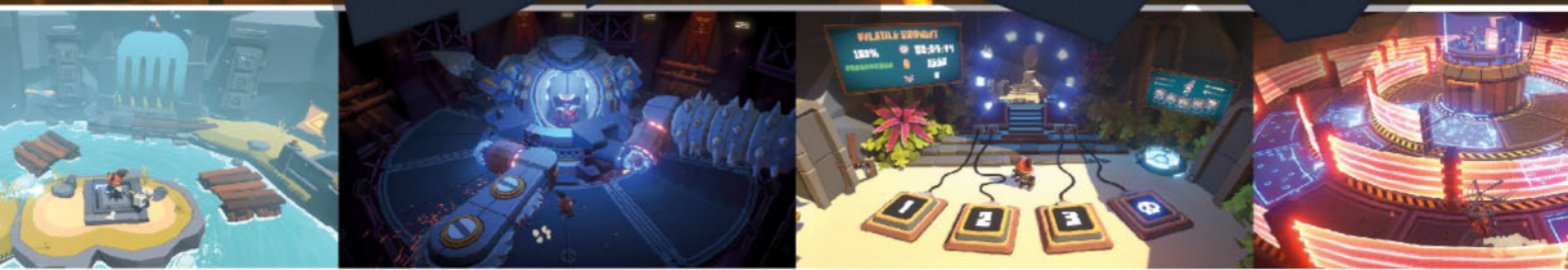


**3** Rich McCormick uses a community mapping tool to get a unique look at *Dark Souls*' interconnected world – taking us on a journey through Lordran's most interesting, and most deadly, locations. While the game has now lost much of its mystery, it's fascinating to get a sense of how exploration felt in those early days.





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# Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Each *Armored Core* main entry brings a totally fresh style to its mecha designs.

## CORE RETURNS

**ARMORED CORE VI** marks the first PC entry in the cult classic mecha sim saga

**N**o longer must those of us who love FromSoftware's build-your-own-mecha series languish in purgatory, stuck playing the last *Armored Core*'s merely OK (and now decade-old) multiplayer on modded PlayStation 3s. *Armored Core VI: Fires of Rubicon* is blazing its way onto PC.

If you've been a dedicated PC player for your whole life and the whole 'mecha anime' thing passed you by in the '90s and '00s, the hype from fans of FromSoftware probably seems odd. What you need to understand is that there are other games with mechs, but they are not *Armored Core*. In the same way that *Elden Ring* is an all-encompassing experience, *Armored Core* has long strived for that same ideal with giant robots. This sequel is a promise to fans that's been decades in the making.

### WAR MACHINES

*Armored Cores* are modular mecha with interchangeable components that allow for almost unlimited customisation. Weapons, arms, generators, sensors, fire control systems, every component imaginable can be ripped out and replaced with something tailored to the needs of the mission. The *Armored Core* is like a mechanical ecosystem, where every component has some

kind of symbiotic relationship with another. A laser weapon may perform fine when relying on a mid-range generator, but the power draw of sustained fire can make it a liability when faced with helicopter squads or tanks.

That power draw could be addressed with a more powerful generator, at the cost of greater weight strain on the legs. Just when you think you've got it all figured out, you'll always run into some kind of design oversight necessitating another round of refits.

And these refits yield a tactile difference in handling. The scream of military grade steel grinding across concrete pitches up and down, the tandem whirring and whizzing of micro-motors rising and falling, conveys this sluggishness. The intricate design considerations that need to be pored over in the garage lend a believability to *Armored Core* that contemporaries *MechWarrior* and *Titanfall* lack, even if no thousand-ton mech could actually stand on two legs without toppling over.

The feeling of piloting an *Armored Core* varies, but the starter AC units often fall somewhere between 'fine' and 'unbearable', with walk cycles and turning speeds that resemble a sleepy Boris Karloff. One of *Armored Core 3*'s most annoying missions has terrorists take control of a hydroelectric dam: touching the stale water below means instant death and it's easy to fall in due to the deliberately awkward controls. But this hellish mission can be almost



### Rose-tinted cockpit

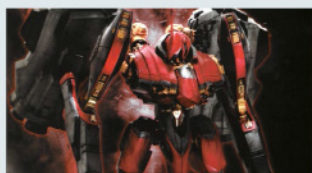
If you're going back to any of the older *Armored Cores*, you may find yourself struggling with the clunky controls that make your unresponsive starter mech feel all the worse. Rebind the turn/pitch buttons to the right analogue stick using an emulator – the PS2 had analogue face buttons, so the swap will make your AC feel like it was designed for a modern controller.





**FAR LEFT:** Jobs this big require a lightweight and agile AC – or one that can bring something with even heavier guns to bear.

## MASTERS OF ARENA Armored Core's most legendary Ravens



### HUSTLER ONE

Covert alias of NINEBALL, the vengeful, unkillable self-aware AI possessing an AC and plotting the downfall of humanity.



### STRAYED

Inheritor of the Anatolian Mercenary's White Glint, personally designed by mecha legend Shoji Kawamori.



### PATCHES

Trusty Patches' first appearance in a FromSoftware game was *Armored Core: For Answer*. Odds are he's a pushover.



### JACK-O

The revolutionary leader who threatened the last of the corporations, his Foxeye is popular among model kit collectors.

entirely stripped of its difficulty by swapping out bipedal legs for a hovercraft unit beneath the hip. Of course, nothing's for free in *Armored Core*, and this brings with it a series of additional design considerations – severe weight restrictions, losing the ability to jump, dodge, or use laser blades. The mission is less annoying, but at the cost of a familiar, reliable toolkit.

These limitations raise the stakes exponentially, especially with such a harsh in-game economy perpetually nipping at your heels. It's not uncommon for new players to screw up a few missions in a row and get saddled with a gigantic, impossible-to-pay repair bill. Compared to *MechWarrior*, where success and failure are typically decided by in-mission performance, *Armored Core's* simulation makes it a more immersive experience, right down to the brutal bookkeeping.

### CORE STRENGTH

In a genre that habitually returns to playing out World War II in space, *Armored Core* breaks the mould with an eerily modern corpo-feudal dystopia. Ravens, mercenaries with the resources to procure and maintain the powerful *Armored Core* mecha, are pit against competing private and public sector interests, with the player deciding which contracts they'll take and which ones they'll pass on. It's grim stuff – early missions see Ravens testing weapons on striking construction workers and clearing out squatters for AI-guided real estate companies.

The narratives here are lightweight and easily ignored, but like the *Souls* series, there's a depth to it all, buried in

item descriptions. The dour mood of neo-mechanical gig work is further accentuated by a discordant aesthetic. Composer Kota Hoshino's soundtracks blend post punk, trance and jazz piano into eerie jams that somehow fit perfectly with the on-screen action.

Aesthetically, *Armored Core* is consistently inspired. *Armored Core 4's* sleek, agile LYNX suits boast humanesque anatomy and garish regalia, like titanium knights and nobility. *Armored Core 5's* mecha barely come up past a LYNX's knee, with boxy proportions that pull from modern military vehicles in service today. *Armored Cores* are frequently adorned by Ravens with their own gaudy '60s auto racing league colours and emblems, proudly displaying sponsorships and league rankings.

Ravens get some flavour text too, contextualising their battle arena behaviour within the game's universe. Skimming through a Raven's pilot bio and noticing that they're an outspoken lover of energy weapons and reverse jointed legs – and then custom-tuning an AC designed to shut down their generator before they can even lift off the ground – feels rewarding. Purists may balk at the assertion that *Armored Core* is comparable to *Dark Souls*, but they're more similar than different. There's a shared emphasis on dodging, equipment load and the thrill of chasing the perfect build.

The convoluted and messy ecosystem of missions, arena matches, and mech tuning is vintage FromSoftware, but much like *Dark Souls*, *Armored Core* is so much greater than the sum of its parts. ■

Noah Smith

## BREAKS THE MOULD WITH AN EERILY MODERN CORPO-FEUDAL DYSTOPIA



## TRANSLATION GAME

**JEREMY BLAUSTEIN** and **SAM BURTON** on what it takes to localise a game

**D**ragonbaby is a localisation company based in Osaka, Japan, which was co-founded by Jeremy Blaustein and Sam Burton. If you recognise Blaustein's name, it may be from his freelance work on games including *Metal Gear Solid* and *Silent Hill*. Burton has been translating for all his working life.

"I'm probably more of an exception than the rule," Burton says, explaining that he's been in localisation since graduating from the University of Manchester in 2015. This was because his first role, with a large localisation company in London, was "very low paid, very long commute. But they accepted people with no experience". Today, he's head of localisation.

"I also think that I'm an exception," says Blaustein, "but then again, I come from two generations earlier than Sam. I studied Japanese and I didn't know playing games [as more than] a hobby. And when I found myself in Japan after a time, at about 25 years of age, I interviewed for Konami in Tokyo. [I worked there] for a few years in the '90s. And that's how I got my start."

It's difficult to judge whether it's harder to become a full-time translator today than it was when Blaustein began – there are more graduates, but there are also more jobs for them – but it's certainly not easy. "The entry level roles are much the same as other professions and industries," Burton says, "in which people want three years of experience before you've been born!" Some larger agencies offer zero-hour contracts, but that's far from ideal.

Blaustein has a huge depth and breadth of experience localising games over the years, and Burton has an enviable CV himself, having previously worked on games including *Sifu*, *Trek to Yomi* and *Star Ocean: The Divine Force*. Their company, Dragonbaby, translates to and from a wide range of languages including Japanese, English, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, and more. But how do they decide who translates what?

### SCRIPT APART

"All our translators translate into their native language, or a language which they are native level at", explains Burton, "and it's not just about the language ability at that stage. It's also

related to the sort of cultural knowledge of growing up somewhere." This is important in order to ensure that the true heart of a game survives translation. Translators are criticised for not translating word for word, but that would result in a poor script.

"What we try to do as localisers and translators," says Blaustein, "is give the equivalent experience using our knowledge of both cultures. We try to receive the product in the source language as a participant, in understanding that language, and understanding what their code systems are. And then we try to translate that into our own code system that we think will best and most accurately get that point across. The only way you could possibly misinterpret that as thinking that we're trying to change anything is to take the most basic and harebrained definition of translation, which is just to exchange words for words, but you really wouldn't arrive at a very entertaining product."

Burton is keen to give a shout out to LQA (Linguistic Quality Assurance) teams. "They get forgotten a lot, but LQA is as much a part of localisation as our translators." Translators, typically, will be working on text in isolation. LQA will check the translation once it's been implemented into the game.

Developers being left out of credits has been a hot topic recently, and it's an issue that translators and localisers are no strangers to. "Even though I've been in this industry less than ten years," says Burton, "I've seen a lot of crap. A lot of people treated badly, a lot of people deserve better, and I want to do better. That's why we went and made Dragonbaby." ■

### DRAGON BABIES

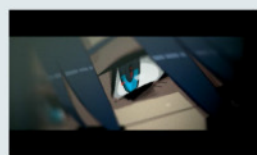
*A few examples of Dragonbaby's work*



**IB**  
Dragonbaby did LQA, Chinese, French, Italian, German, and Spanish translations for this.



**NEEDED STREAMER OVERLOAD**  
The script was full of Japanese netspeak and references, which the team translated to English.



**SIGNALIS**  
Dragonbaby handled the simplified Chinese localisation and LQA for this survival horror.



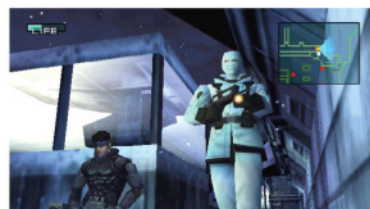
**WORLD OF HORROR**  
The Tokyo Game Show demo benefitted from Dragonbaby's localisation expertise.



**“IT’S ALSO RELATED TO THE  
SORT OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE  
OF GROWING UP SOMEWHERE”**



Burton almost certainly hadn't aged this much by the time he'd finished on *Sifu*.



**ABOVE:** Do not adjust your page; *Trek to Yomi* is supposed to be black and white.

**LEFT:** Last year's *Star Ocean: The Divine Force* had outfits that are awesome in any language.



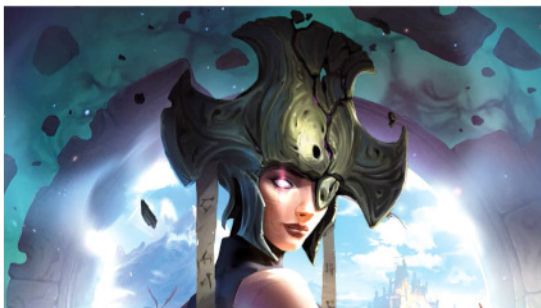
## 1 month



### STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

**RELEASE** April 28, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Respawn Entertainment

Cal Kestis returns after the events of *Star Wars Jedi: Outcast* equipped with new powers, Lightsabers and, excitingly, rideable mounts, too.



### AGE OF WONDERS 4

**RELEASE** May 2, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Triumph Studios

The venerable *Age of Wonders* series returns for more epic 4X strategy and turn-based tactical combat. Control and grow your faction in a magical realm.

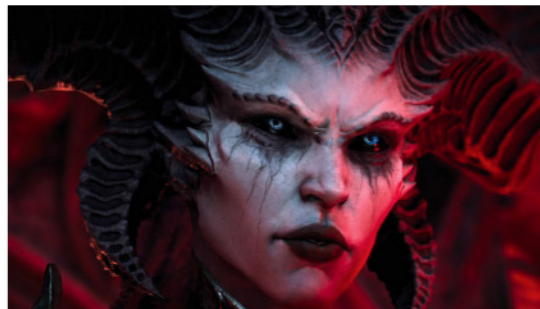


### REDFALL

**RELEASE** May 2, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Austin

The co-op open-world FPS vampire slay-'em-up from Arkane, the talented studio behind *Dishonored* and *Deathloop*, promises slick combat and visuals.

## 3 months



### DIABLO IV

**RELEASE** June 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Blizzard

The beloved action-RPG series returns once more with a darker look, plenty of exciting classes to play as and, hopefully, no auction house.



### FINAL FANTASY XVI

**RELEASE** June 22, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Square Enix

*Final Fantasy* returns once more with gamers slipping into the shoes of Clive Rosfield during his adventures in Valisthea. Chocobos will be ridden.



### BALDUR'S GATE III

**RELEASE** August 31, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Larian Studios

The legendary fantasy RPG returns in the hands of Larian Studios, the talented chaps behind the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Minsc and Boo confirmed!



## 6 months



### STARFIELD

**RELEASE** September 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

We now have a confirmed release date for *Starfield*, with the open world 'Skyrim in space' RPG dropping in early September. Start planning your character now.



### CITIES: SKYLINES 2

**RELEASE** 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Colossal Order

Promising "the most realistic city simulation ever created", *Cities: Skylines 2* looks set to be the ultimate city-building sandbox. Confirmed for a 2023 launch.



### ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

**RELEASE** 2023 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware Inc.

Stompy giant robots activate! Pilot a heavily armoured mech and engage in dynamic, fast-paced combat, both in single and multiplayer. Set in a burning star system. Cool!

## 12 months+



### WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

**RELEASE** 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

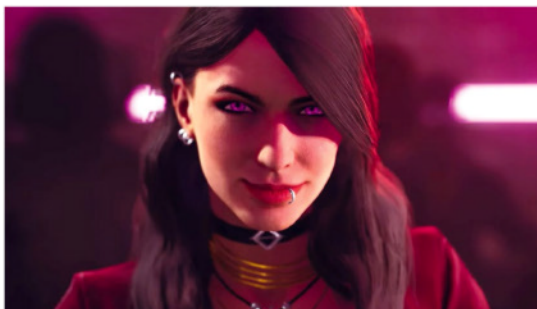
It's time to grab your chainsword and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more once again. Action-packed, gore-soaked sequel incoming in 2023.



### HOMEWORLD 3

**RELEASE** 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox Software

The venerable 3D real-time space strategy *Homeworld* series returns at some point in 2023, picking up the story after the events of the two previous games.



### VAMPIRE TM - BLOODLINES 2

**RELEASE** 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Could the much-wanted RPG return from the dead this year?

#### ENHANCED

##### HALF-LIFE

Thought you were finally done with *Half-Life*? Well, think again, as a stunning new total conversion mod by talented modder sultim\_t brings ray tracing to the seminal PC gaming mega hit. You can grab the mod now for free over at sultim\_t's GitHub page: [shorturl.at/cjrlP](https://shorturl.at/cjrlP)











## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
May

DEVELOPER  
Airship Syndicate

PUBLISHER  
Digital Extremes

LINK  
[playwayfinder.com](http://playwayfinder.com)

## WAYFINDER

An MMO from the teams behind *Warframe* and *Darksiders*

**F**or nearly a decade, developer Airship Syndicate has felt like it's building up to something. Formed out of the ashes of THQ and Vigil Games – the creators of the *Darksiders* series – it's been quietly releasing very good games ever since, such as *Darksiders Genesis* and *Ruined King*. Its projects have been modest, but full of whip-smart RPG mechanics and progression systems, each feeling like a testing ground for bigger ideas. *Wayfinder* feels like the culmination of that work.

The game is an MMO action-RPG – it's published by Digital Extremes, and that's appropriate, because really if you think of this as *Warframe*'s structure combined with the style and combat of *Darksiders*, you won't be far off. Brought to life by Joe Madureira's distinctive chunky, colourful art style, it's an immediately pleasing fantasy world to escape into. Rather than create your own character, you pick from a roster of predefined ones, in the style of a hero shooter – a choice that allows the game to play to the strengths of its appealing character design, with ample customisation options still allowing players to make their hero their own.

For my time with the game, I start out with Niss – a demonic-looking assassin with shadowy magic and, it has to be said, amazing abs. Despite the MMO structure, *Wayfinder* is great at throwing you right into the action – before I know it I'm already slicing and dashing my way through a dungeon with two other

greenhorn heroes. It's a mysterious, ruined monastery and, importantly, it's crawling with vicious goblins.

Straight away, the action combat impresses me. It's all about layers – at a basic level it's quick attacks, heavy attacks, dodges, blocks and parries, but on top of that is a set of three special abilities, an ultimate ability, your hero passive, and a weapon-specific ability and passive. It's just the right balance – not so much to keep track of that it's overwhelming, but just enough that you've always got something to be thinking about.

## THIS IS THE WAY

With Niss, the focus is on dodges – instead of a forward roll, she gets a teleporting blink dash, and her abilities let her dodge more, damage enemies she dodges through and buff her allies' dodges. Her ultimate sends her on an unlimited spree of deadly dashes, like a Kurosawa movie on fast forward. In the moments where I have to take a breath, recovering my stamina and letting abilities recharge, my focus shifts to my dual daggers – a weapon type that's all about getting in lots of quick hits to charge up super-powered heavy attacks, which in turn charge up a powerful multi-hit state.

The fast pace of fights is a great match for the game's Expeditions – randomly generated dungeons full of monsters, traps and simple puzzles. These are your main means of progress, spitting out treasure and crafting materials, and I love how bite-sized they are – each running about ten minutes. That's not to say they're easy – they can be a challenge – but they don't feel like a huge commitment, and during the beta period I've enjoyed being able to just hop in for a quick fix whenever I fancy it.

The random generation keeps them fresh, but a big gimmick for the game is the fact that you can tweak them to your liking. That includes an impressive number of difficulty levels but, more importantly, Imbuements – items you can spend to add modifiers to the dungeon. These include everything from enemies exploding when they die, to poisonous pools that grow the longer you stand in them, to piles of valuable but cursed gold littered all over. Different combinations of

PLAYED  
IT

**I START OUT WITH NISS, A DEMONIC-LOOKING ASSASSIN WITH SHADOWY MAGIC**



## Wayfinder



✦ dungeon type and Imbuement can grant you different rewards for completion, and tie in to quests in clever ways – such as an alchemist NPC only being found in the mines when a toxic modifier is on.

In the final release, the plan is for these to be stackable, with different combos having unexpected effects. That definitely sounds like my kind of chaos – three at once would be a riot of weirdness popping off around you. But even with only one Imbuement per run allowed in the closed beta, it already makes Expeditions super replayable. It's an ambitious game for a small studio, but I suspect it won't be huge, so it's a clever way of getting as much as possible out of the content without overstretching it.

## BLOB HUNTING

You can also use Imbuements on Hunts – big boss fights launched separately from Expeditions, that combine elements of MMORPG bosses with the feel of *Monster Hunter*. As in that series, these huge beasts drop specific rewards used for crafting new weapons, encouraging you to replay them and master their patterns. The fun of these is how they shake you out of your normal combat patterns – jumping to avoid a giant slime's ground pound attacks and dashing around to stay safe from its explosive spawn, or switching rapidly between AOEing down a horde of spiders and doing as much single target damage as possible whenever their enormous, crystalline queen shows her face.

And then there's the open world, where *Wayfinder* feels most traditionally MMO-like – a sprawling landscape of rolling green hills, secret dungeons and public events. From bandits camped in an abandoned railway station, to forests infested with strange, corrupted beasts, it's plenty to hook your interest. For a longer session, it's a fun place to just explore – and through adventuring here, you can unlock new Expeditions. But it does feel like this is where the game isn't playing as much to its strengths. Journeys from A to B can feel long-winded, and a handful of very drawn out fetch quests feel really at odds with the instant gratification of the repeatable activities.

## IT FEELS LIKE PLAYING A PRO-WRESTLER AS YOU HAMMER DOWN MONSTERS

## MEASURING TREASURE

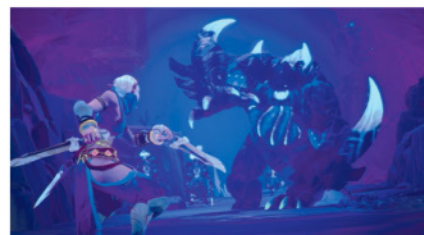
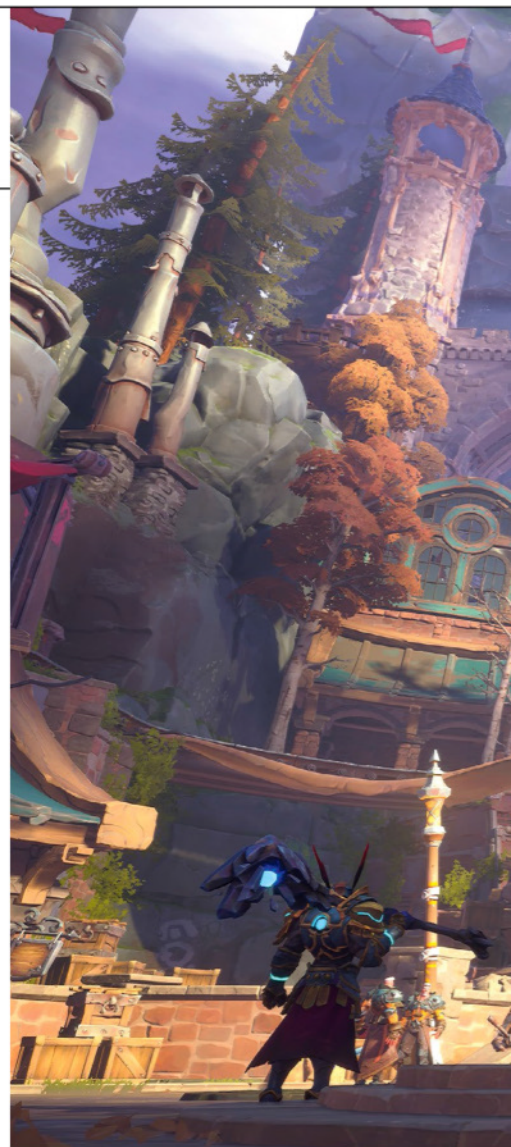
I'm similarly a little mixed on the progression systems. Many of the individual elements are very clever – such as Echoes, souls of defeated enemies that can be equipped to gain buffs and even take on their traits. But it's a game without much in the way of real loot to find and that means the majority of what you earn is a pretty dizzying array of currencies, crafting materials and upgrades. I found myself settling into some fun progression loops over the course of my time with the beta, but it is a bit overwhelming, and it often felt like whenever I was concentrating on one thing, I was letting something else slide.

I do fear that there could be some serious grind, too. Every character can use every weapon, but actually getting hold of a new type – a rifle – took me a good chunk of my 12 hours with the game. You can also unlock new characters and switch seamlessly between them, but even by the end of the beta, actually achieving the requirements to do so seemed hopelessly out of reach. Gold, used for almost everything, became a significant bottleneck for me, and forced me to prioritise certain goals over others in a way that felt restrictive.

Fortunately, the developers eventually took pity on me – for the last few days of my hands-on, another hero was unlocked for free. Senja, an amazonian gladiator with, it has to be said, even more amazing abs, seems primed to become the game's mascot on launch. I'm glad I got to play her, because what's striking is how different she feels from Niss – starting out with a hulking great axe, she's all about big hits that stagger enemies, and choosing the right moments to launch into elaborate, showboating taunts that leave her vulnerable to attack but power up her damage. It feels like playing a pro-wrestler as you hammer down monsters while playing to the crowd – a million miles away from Niss' agile ninja tricks.

As I'm levelling her up through all the dungeons I've gotten to grips with, it all feels new again – and this is what makes me excited about *Wayfinder*. It feels like if I had a whole roster of these characters, an arsenal of weapons and a bag full of Imbuements, I'd never get bored. As long as Airship Syndicate can find the right pace for unlocking each dish of this buffet of dungeoneering, I'll be there ready to stuff my face when it launches into Early Access in May this year.

Robin Valentine







**ABOVE:** The game's cities and landscapes are really striking.

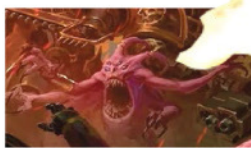
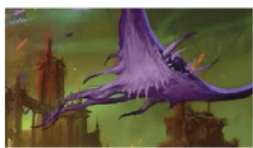
**LEFT:** For the beta, cosmetics were free – it's not clear yet how they'll be earned in the final game, or if they'll actually be microtransactions.





## PREVIEW

### Warhammer 40,000: Boltgun



#### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
TBC

DEVELOPER  
Auroch Digital

PUBLISHER  
Focus Entertainment

LINK  
focus-entmt.com

## WARHAMMER 40,000: BOLTGUN

Meet your new favourite shotgun  
in this boomer shooter

**W**hen you get right down to it, is there really any difference between Warhammer 40,000 and Doom? Permanently angry space marines, giant guns, sci-fi installations being invaded by demons from literal Hell... basically all the same, innit? Really, it's a wonder no one's made a Warhammer boomer shooter before now.

Warhammer 40,000: Boltgun keeps things gloriously simple. After a charmingly unsettling opening cutscene, the preview build just drops me on a planet full of Chaos cultists with a chainsword and a dream, and tells me to have at it. Immediately I'm racing around the map sending up pixelated sprays of blood, finding guns that would be banned under the Geneva Conventions, and slotting comically large keys into control panels to open doors to places full of even more enemies.

It's an absolute blast. The guns – in this set of levels including a boltgun, a shotgun and a plasma gun – are chunky and superbly satisfying, and the game makes sure you've always got more targets to use them on. The shotgun in particular is a new all-timer for me, taking enemies apart in booming blasts worthy of an Ultramarine. The maps are simple and built to be raced through, but full of secrets and power ups for curious explorers to uncover. It's fast, simple, gory fun that couldn't feel more appropriate to the heavy metal world of Warhammer. The fact that it has a dedicated 'yell at the

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enemy that you're going to kill them' button really sums up its vibe.

The combination of speed and power really nails the Space Marine fantasy. You feel every inch the crazed, armed-to-the-teeth super soldier – monstrously powerful, but thrown against overwhelming odds that force you to never slow down long enough to become an easy target for the hordes.

#### SHOT STUFF

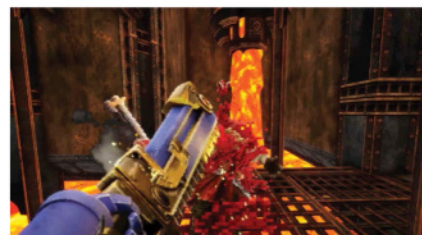
Visually, it draws heavily on *Doom* – enemies are 2D sprites animating in a 3D world – but with some modern lighting and particle effects that come together into something really striking. And a surprisingly wide variety of enemy types, from cultists and Chaos Space Marines to Pink Horrors and Plague Toads, means there's always some new ugly foe to catch your eye (and your bullets). It's capped off with detailed pixel-animated cutscenes, which evoke classic point-and-click adventure game visuals while also capturing the atmosphere of the setting.

Just as its aesthetic combines retro and modern techniques, the action too feels like a clever mix of the conventions of *Doom* with more modern FPS ideas. Boomer shooter purists may cock an eyebrow at having a charge-dash ability on a cooldown, a dedicated grenade button and melee attacks, but it all adds up to an experience that's old school yet accessible. If you like the idea of shooting monsters with big guns at high speed, chances are you'll like this regardless of whether you've been playing the likes of *Dusk* and *Ultrakill* or not.

And certainly anyone who's a big fan of Warhammer 40,000 will find plenty to love. Faithful touches include Pink Horrors splitting into Blue Horrors when slain and even a damage system built around the strength and toughness scores of the tabletop game. The shotgun makes short work of human enemies, for example, but for Chaos Space Marines your boltgun is a better bet, and the thick armour of a Chaos Terminator demands a plasma gun to melt through it.

*Boltgun* doesn't have a release date yet, but hopefully it won't be much longer before it comes sprinting onto Steam.

Robin Valentine



Nurglings are just happy little guys that want to give you a disease.

**FAITHFUL TOUCHES INCLUDE  
PINK HORRORS SPLITTING INTO  
BLUE HORRORS WHEN SLAIN**





**ABOVE:** As everyone knows, Pink Horrors split into two Blue Horrors when they die, which in turn split into two Brimstone Horrors each.

**LEFT:** From a sprawling fortress to an overrun mausoleum, the preview build shows off an impressive variety of locations.





## PREVIEW

### *Mortal Sin*

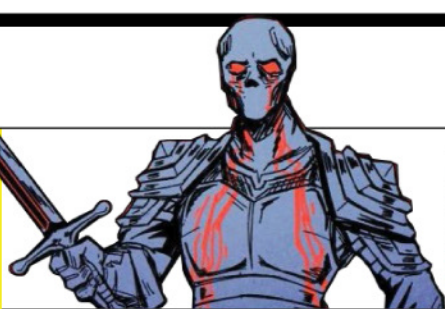


**ABOVE:** This guy's painting and decorating just isn't up to scratch.

**RIGHT:** This guy didn't get his copy of PC Gamer magazine.







## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
March 15

**DEVELOPER**  
Nikola Todorovic

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/3yZudRX](https://bit.ly/3yZudRX)

## MORTAL SIN

A dungeon crawler with incredible melee combat

**T**he first time I got really far in *Mortal Sin* and unlocked its third area, I thought I was overpowered. My character was basically Guts from the manga *Berserk*. On muddling through that third area and reaching *Mortal Sin*'s Early Access endgame though, I realised my error: you have to be overpowered to survive these final levels.

*Mortal Sin* is a first-person melee combat-focused roguelike from solo developer Nikola Todorovic. And, in a really rather weird turn of events, we actually published a review of *Mortal Sin* last March (it's still on the website) after an early version of the game was mistakenly labelled as a finished build by a third party representing Todorovic. Despite that mix-up, PC Gamer contributor Tom Sykes loved that early version of the game and its "heart-stopping melee" combat, giving it a very respectable 81%, and I'm pleased to report that the complaints he did have are well addressed in the game's impending Early Access release. Oh, and that heart-stopping combat is still very much intact and just as adrenaline-inducing as ever.

## OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

The first-person melee combat is the star of the show here, and it's been refined and reduced like an unctuous demi-glace. Connecting a hit with an enemy produces a crunchy, screen-shaking hit register that clips the action ever so slightly and

sends their nasty giblets flying every which way, leaving delimbed (and often beheaded) opponents to wander impotently until you put them out of their misery. It feels incredible, and when you wade into a big group of enemies and just give them one big swing of the One Hundred Man Slayer, hoo boy! Just a chunk chunk chunk, with the screen juddering as it makes contact with each enemy in turn, practically lagging out from all the hit registers.

*Mortal Sin* passes two crucial gut checks for me: the first is that when I'm not playing it, I find my thoughts drifting back to its blue and red hellscape and brutal melee dance – it's a game I got lost in playing, and I was so deep in one play session that I almost forgot to run out and buy my nephew a birthday gift before the shop closed. The other is that each class unlock feels like it could be my new favourite. Tom's criticism that the early version of *Mortal Sin* didn't have enough meta progression was well and truly addressed.

## EXCALIBUR-ILLIANT

I was wondering how I could play anything other than the pugilistic, open palm and roundhouse kicking Monk, but then I unlocked the Berserker and found that damned sword, the only videogame Dragonslayer, Buster Sword, 'large hunk of iron', big ass sword that's felt as good as the ones FromSoftware makes. And even as I say that, I find myself eyeing the distant unlock of the blood orb-launching, cast-from-hit points Vampire class.

*Mortal Sin* is elevated further by its presentation. Every frame looks like it was lifted from a metal album cover or '70s fantasy dust jacket. It's a Van Wizard, prog rock sort of game. *Mortal Sin* has the timeless, cel-shaded perfection of something like *Okami*, and I think my only wish is that Todorovic gets more sci-fi and weird with future dungeon tilesets, like he did in the game's final level and hidden areas.

Really, *Mortal Sin* is a must-buy, even in Early Access, and I can't wait to see how it grows as development goes on. An intense action-horror dungeon crawler with combat and an art style to die for.

*Ted Litchfield*

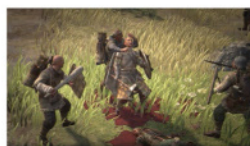
EVERY FRAME LOOKS LIKE IT WAS LIFTED FROM A METAL ALBUM COVER

Should have booked a different hotel.









## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
Q2 2023 (Early Access)

**DEVELOPER**  
Shiro Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Shiro Unlimited

**LINK**  
wartales.net

## WARTALES

Wander a land filled with danger and unpleasant wildlife

**R**ats. They're a staple of early RPG levels, and while some games have fun with them, like giving them psychic powers or hiding a single huge one under an inn, in *Wartales* they're grotesque, their disgusting hole surrounded by the carcasses of their victims, the ground made sticky by blood.

I hadn't even picked up a quest, so I didn't need to attack. I just saw rats and waded in with all the misplaced bravery of the level-two fighter. And frankly, I've had better mornings.

This fight against rats hinges on killing the broodmother, a swollen monstrosity who summons more rats out of the ground every time she gets a turn. *Wartales*, from the French developer behind *Dune: Spice Wars*, has been in Early Access for a while now, and is aiming for a release later this year. The game switches between real-time exploration and turn-based combat, so pitting my party of six fighters, rangers and archers against 15 rats sees the rodents nibble away at health and armour while I'm waiting for a turn. I prevail, but my party members are injured, have the plague, and are in need of a rest.

*Wartales* plonks you down in a rural landscape and asks you to make the best of it. You're not special, there's no prophecy, nor do you have a mysterious amulet, birthmark or hairstyle. There's not even a 'you', as you begin with four characters (plus a pony, sworn to carry your burdens) and can recruit more.

**PLONKS YOU DOWN IN A RURAL LANDSCAPE AND ASKS YOU TO MAKE THE BEST OF IT**

Some may die, others leave because you're not paying them enough, but there are often useful warriors sitting in the taverns looking for work.

Those that survive can have their equipment upgraded, with items either picked off corpses, bought, or crafted. Then there are stat upgrades, oils, potions... the list of familiar fantasy game items is long. There are also little minigames for mining, lockpicking and forging, bonuses for fighting side by side with your allies or surrounding the enemy, and constant opportunities to steal.

## VILLAGE PEOPLE

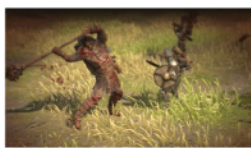
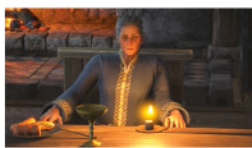
Things didn't get much better for my plague-infested party. After staggering back to the village of Stromkapp we purchased plague cures, and repaired our armour at the forge. We bought beans and mutton at the market, avoiding the rat meat on sale after our previous experience, and took a look inside the town hall. There, the mayor sat in front of a roaring fire, apparently with nothing to do but look fierce in case anyone came in. She had a moan at us about refugees, joining a chorus of voices we'd heard who don't appreciate the destitute coming into their lands.

A quest-giver at the inn sends us to a place called The Haven, which sounds lovely and surely not the site of a bandit raid. It turns out to be up a snowy track not too far out of town, and allows the game to display one of its flaws: pathfinding. My party gets stuck on little things, needing to be micromanaged around rocks but able to pass through fields and forests on their own. NPCs seem to have similar problems, as we pass a party of refugees with a cart walking in a loop. Every time they hit the snowline, they turn around and go back down the hill.

There are a number of other groups roaming the roads of Tiltren County, an icon hanging over them to show their status. Some are refugees, some are bandits, some are just out looking for trouble. More than once we run into a group of drunks stumbling around with the intention of harassing refugees, but instead we harass them back until they're not in a position to do that any more. There are also raw crafting materials available if you wander off from the road in

PLAYED  
IT





✗ the form of fishing spots, crashed carts with a body sprawled nearby, metal ore, or timber in the forests.

It's in one of these forests that we hit a snag – wolves. More powerful than the rats but thankfully not carrying plague, they surround my party. Luckily, my lead fighter, who I've promoted to captain, is wearing some heavy armour. She's got a buckler we made at a forge too, and is generally in better shape than the brutes with clubs and barrel-lid shields who make up the second line of attack.

### INTO THE WOODS

The Haven turns out to be a small fort in snowy clearing in the forest, and once we've taken care of the wolves – they run away in the end, probably scared off by my party's smell – we skirt around some bandits in the forest. We can see them as a red outline among the trees, and a vision cone makes it easy to pass behind them when they're not looking. There are also ghost wolves and boars roaming the forests, which are easily killed but terrify party members so much they may run off in the middle of combat.

From The Haven we proceed to a woodcutting camp, and set about defending it. You can reposition your party prior to landing the first blow, and when it's your turn you can select any member who hasn't moved yet that round. Some idiot has left bear traps laying around too, adding environmental hazards to the mix. In other fights, these can be lightning strikes or rockfalls, their occurrence telegraphed a turn in advance so you can move out of the way or push enemies into them.

Being able to push an enemy back is a useful thing, and my party's archer has just this ability. Ranged weapons are scarce, and nobody's flinging spells about, so being able to separate combatants is a useful move. My archer is my healer too, but is only able to help her friends out if they're dying, a state in which their movement is halved and they're unable to use combat skills.

My party starts the fight in a bad position, however, with mud underfoot that reduces their movement, so my archer is pressed into action and I start

to wish I had more of them in the group. I also wish I was more accurate with my shots, as one damages a party member, souring the friendship between the two comrades. These relationships reflect how much a party member is liked or disliked by other members, and can lead to someone leaving the party if things get too stressful.

### ELITE, DANGEROUS

Back on the world map, and I'm now powerful enough that a band of low-level criminals isn't too much of a problem, but on my way down the mountain I run into an elite. He's got a price on his head, which makes him a tempting target. A steady flow of money is essential in the game, as you will need to pay your party's wages. You are all mercenaries, after all. Payment takes place when you camp, along with eating, and failure to do either will affect the happiness of your merry band.

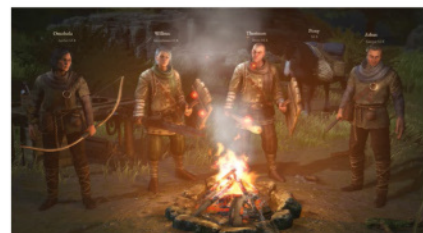
Experience, which you pick up as you wander around bashing or discovering things, allows you to unlock traits in your party. Among these are running for short periods, and being more frugal with money and food. They don't make the need to feed and pay your unwashed gang of thugs and former fishermen go away, but they do mean they will consume less.

There's a huge range of skills to unlock, from extra carrying capacity to additional attack moves and the ability to place markers on the map. Carrying out quests as a mercenary, picked up in the inn from two sources, fills a meter that advances completion for the area you're in. Some you'll be given, others you need to buy, or attempt to steal.

It's a detailed world, full of farms and travellers and things to look at, but there's a lot of repetition when you get there. My party arrived at the same ruined fort several times, populated by different people, and it would be nice to see this mixed up a bit in the final release.

That elite warrior, however, is wandering around in a field, so I slip off the road and confront him. It goes well at first, as I get my party into position, surround him, hit him with a special move that lowers his strength, and get ready to bathe in the gold we're going to collect. Then he swings his giant hammer in an arc that catches three of my party for significant damage. You can retreat from combat at any time, and cowardice carries the day. These have been my war tales. I look forward to many more.

Ian Evenden



**RANGED WEAPONS ARE  
SCARCE, AND NOBODY'S  
FLINGING SPELLS ABOUT**





**ABOVE:** It's a lovely day in the village, and you are a horrible mercenary.

**LEFT:** You'll need a thief in your party to even contemplate stealing something.







## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
Spring

**DEVELOPER**  
Un je ne sais quoi

**PUBLISHER**  
Focus Entertainment

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/DordogneGame](http://bit.ly/DordogneGame)

## DORDOGNE

Go on summer holiday with this beautiful watercolour game

**S**urprisingly for a game as ridiculously good-looking as *Dordogne*, it's the audio that has impressed me most. I'm not just talking about the soundtrack – comprised of lush, heart-tugging synths – but the sound design, which accurately models your every action as you explore this beautiful French idyll in the past and present.

There are different types of footsteps-on-floorboards sounds: scuffing ones and just *lightly* creaky. And every time you open a drawer it sounds just right. That I noticed the sound at all speaks of *Dordogne*'s impeccable attention to detail, but after playing an hour-long preview build I'm still not sure what to make of it as a game.

The premise gripped me immediately, as a woman named Mimi returns to the Dordogne region to unravel a mystery: she can't remember anything before she turned 13. There has also been a schism between her father and grandmother, who recently passed away. Can returning to her grandma's picturesque cottage – where, as a kid, she once stayed over the summer – help to recover her memories?

Well, yes. Mimi's memories gradually come back to her as she explores the empty house, triggering extended flashbacks to that distant summer holiday. As adult Mimi, I lit a candle and traipsed round the garden and a few of the rooms. As kid Mimi – alone with her grandma, when she really wants to spend

the summer with her friends – I did what I was told to, whether it was emptying my suitcase or doing a spot of drawing.

Actions like these are given sort-of minigames, where you open drawers and drag your clothes inside, scratch away with a pencil on a piece of paper, or (at breakfast) tip a box of cereal into a bowl. They're not difficult, they're not puzzles, but I think I understand why we're being asked to perform them. It's to ground us in Mimi's world – the past and present of it.

Which brings me back to the audio, which fulfils a similar function. Every tinkle of cereal, every footstep creaking a floorboard, serves to anchor us to this interpretation of the French countryside.

## MIMI ME

I'll bang on about the artwork now, as you might know *Dordogne* as 'the watercolour game'. It is absolutely stonking, and more three-dimensional than I was expecting, with elements popping out of the screen and the camera tilting this way and that as you walk. More impressive are the sun rays and dust motes that drift around. Together with the (fully 3D) characters, these effects bring the beautifully hand-drawn scenes to life.

Just before the demo ended, Mimi and her grandmother paid a visit to a nearby river. I was given a camera to play around with, and a first-person scene to take photos of, still in that gorgeous watercolour style. The resulting pictures can be inserted into the binder we're given to collect our experiences.

On each page we can stick things like photos, collectible stickers and poems assembled from expository snippets. It's how we'll record, and personalise, our time with *Dordogne*'s unhurried story.

It came as a shock when the demo ended. I felt like I was still playing through the tutorial, having finally been given a means to truly engage with the world – but no clear sense of how much freedom I'll be afforded. Is this a more linear narrative game, or will I be let loose to explore Dordogne, filling the binder with photos and stickers as I see fit? Like Mimi, the game was just coming out of its shell.

Still, I'm intrigued. I want to uncover the mystery. I want to see much more of this beautiful world.

Tom Sykes



Foreground elements like this hat rack add depth to the watercolour backgrounds.



## MIMI'S MEMORIES GRADUALLY COME BACK TO HER AS SHE EXPLORES THE EMPTY HOUSE





**ABOVE:** Walking through the world is like exploring an exhibition from the inside.

**LEFT:** As you play, you'll record your experiences in a binder given by your grandmother.



## PREVIEW

### Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3



#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
May 11, 2023

**DEVELOPER**  
RaceWard Studio

**PUBLISHER**  
Nacon

**LINK**  
nacongaming.com

## ISLE OF MAN TT: RIDE ON THE EDGE 3

What's that coming over the hill – is it a (Ducati) Monster?

**T**he Isle of Man TT is regarded as the greatest motorsport event on the planet, offering the ultimate prize in motorcycle racing. Fresh from the success of *RiMS*, does *Ride on the Edge 3* developer RaceWard Studio have what it takes to grab the Tourist Trophy from previous custodian Kylotonn?

The first thing to note about *Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3* is that this isn't simply a cynical re-skin of the previous games in the series. It's all too common an occurrence these days that the old adage 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' takes root – certainly when it comes to popular gaming franchises – but *Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3* is a great example of how to take an established series and turn it on its head. The most obvious change here is that new developer RaceWard Studio has chucked the baby out with the bath water, and banished the menu driven system seen in the prequels; instead opting to drop the player into a pseudo open world based on a laser scanned 1:1 recreation of the Isle of Man – a dot in the sea between England and Ireland, if you're not familiar with it.

It's not a complete recreation of course, but enough of an open(ish) world exists so that the player, in the guise of any one of the real life TT racers, replete with 2022 season accurate bike and leathers (2023 riders and liveries are coming as DLC), can idly traverse the highways and byways of the titular isle, discovering new

routes and points of interest and of course, discovering race events to enter. It really is a night and day approach and breathes fresh air into the *Isle of Man TT* series – I for one was not expecting a *Forza Horizon*-lite approach. Granted, you can't take these slick-tyred, two-wheeled road beasts off the beaten track and go full *Dakar Desert Rally* across hill and dale, but it is encouraging to see the game come at the iconic annual motorcycling event from a new angle.

#### SYMBIOSIS

The career mode is the star of the show here, with everything you do within the open world geared towards earning currency and experience points, the former of which can be used to upgrade your ride; the latter of which is displayed on your profile during online races as a bragging right. Fast travel points, season race events and challenges are unlocked simply by stumbling across them as you pootle around the island... if traversing mountain chicanes at 180mph could ever be considered 'pootling', that is. RaceWard Studio's previous foray into the world of motorcycle racing sims was 2021's *RiMS* – a title that was much more about tinkering with bike setups and swapping parts than most; and there are hints of this pedigree on show within *Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3*.

"When we first thought about the concept for the new *Isle of Man TT* game, we recognised that the TT is part of the culture of the island, the island is the TT," says lead game designer Alex Carullo. "So we thought we should change the previous menu-based system, and make the island more of a focus... the island and the riders are in a state of symbiosis. They have to know the island to race there."

#### PUNISHMENT

RaceWard Studio is keen to stress that while *Isle of Man: Ride on the Edge 3* does inherit some of the work laid down by Kylotonn and runs on the familiar KT Engine (which also powers recent WRC outings), this latest instalment is a whole new package with its own identity and unique features. The physics engine, again, is a more refined version of that seen in *RiMS*; meaning those



The TV-style presentation of the replay mode can be spectacular.



**"WE RECOGNISED THAT THE TT IS PART OF THE CULTURE OF THE ISLAND"**



Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3



**ABOVE:** You'd probably want double glazing if you lived here.

**LEFT:** Riders are given the signal to start with a tap on the shoulder.

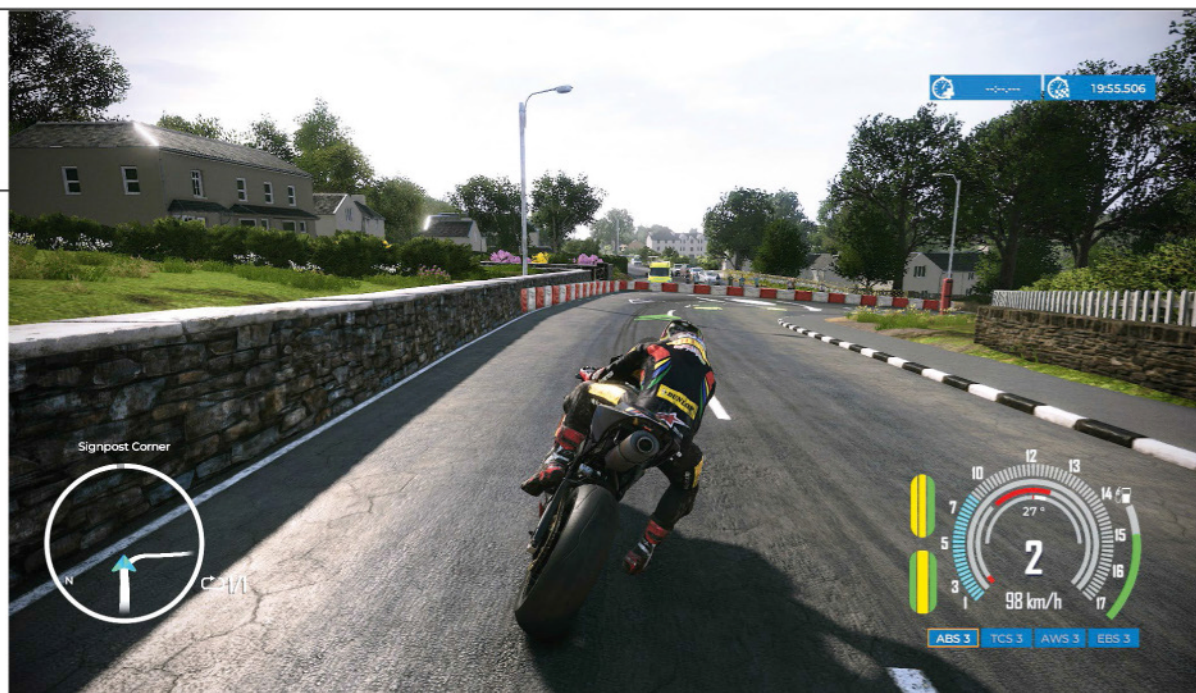


## PREVIEW

### Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3

**RIGHT:** Wear zones are shown across the width of the tyres.

**BELOW:** Winding up on the mountain roads is pure exhilaration.





## Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3

Crash too often and your paintwork will start to look worse for wear.



who honed their skills around the famous Mountain TT Circuit in previous *Ride on the Edge* games may want to spend a bit of time getting to grips with the new handling model.

For the beginner, a number of riding aides are available – and recommended – while gluttons for punishment can immediately access a more realistic experience; one which turns the physics up to 'reality' and will see 1,000cc lumps going sideways over dry stone walls with alarming regularity if throttle, brakes, and racing line are not all attuned in perfect harmony. RaceWard Studio even went as far as enlisting the expertise of TT rider Davey Todd to ensure the experience is as accurate as realistically possible. Todd, one of the brightest rising stars in the British Superbike Championship and Isle of Man TT cadre (and the bloke on the game's cover) admits to having used the first couple of *Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge* titles to hone his skills when tackling the infamous course for real.

"I used the first game as a tool to learn the course and race the TT in 2018," Davey explains. "I didn't even have a console or a PC back then, I used my brother's PlayStation. But it really helped me to go there and race in the TT and do some great things. It 100% helped me because it's so, so accurate and this latest game is even more true to life. It's not just the corners or the markers, it's the undulations and the bumps in the road... RaceWard Studio have done a great job in capturing it all."

### WINDING ROADS

On the topic of *RiMS* there's more than a little of that game's legacy peppered throughout, with an in-depth vehicle upgrade system employed. It isn't as daunting as the system seen in *RiMS*, but those who want to get busy with the spanners can adjust and tune to their heart's content.

"The bikes in *RiMS* were designed with the concept of circuit racing in mind," Alex Carullo continues. "Here, there are public roads. The widths of the roads varies, you have kerbs and divots and grooves. They were not designed by an engineer who thought bikes would go there and run

perfectly. What we also took from *RiMS* is the mechanics of the bike. But here we didn't want to focus too much on the mechanics side of things because that would take the focus away from the actual racing and the island setting."

As you'd expect for a game that is promoting the open world as one of its main features, there's a lot of track out there to race on. Naturally, you'll get the opportunity to tame the legendary 37 mile TT Circuit of course (in all weathers and times of day), but *Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3* also introduces historic circuits such as St John's and Clypse, as well as fantasy routes that are built from various portions of the open world road network. In total, that gives the discerning motorcyclist over 200km (124 miles) of tarmac to eat up, and over 30 circuits to test their mettle on. And mettle you'll definitely need, as the sense of speed on display here, especially from the multiple helmet cam and onboard viewpoints, borders on the trouser-soiling at times.

### HISTORICAL INTEREST

From the preview of *Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3*, it looks like RaceWard Studio will simultaneously please old hands and newcomers to the series alike. I was a little worried when I learned of the inclusion of aspects of *RiMS* – especially given the steep learning curve that game offers. That said, I was pleasantly surprised, not only with the brand new open world setting of the career mode, but the satisfying bike handling, and array of event types. The final game also promises online multiplayer races with up to ten entrants, esports events, and a roster of challenges to keep riders busy.

Away from the glitz and bombast of the 200mph racing, the level of detail lavished upon the world is commendable. Dotted around the game world are points of interest where you can learn about the history of the Isle of Man itself and I found myself wanting to discover the next point, unlocking journal entries detailing nuggets of information on the Manx language, the origin of the name of the island and so on. RaceWard Studio worked with the Isle of Man government to include this level of granular detail, ensuring that *Isle of Man TT: Ride on the Edge 3* promises not only to be the most in-depth and feature rich entry in the series so far; but that it might also teach you a thing or two about the history of the TT and the very island it takes place upon.

Tom Charnock

**GLUTTONS FOR PUNISHMENT CAN IMMEDIATELY ACCESS A MORE REALISTIC EXPERIENCE**





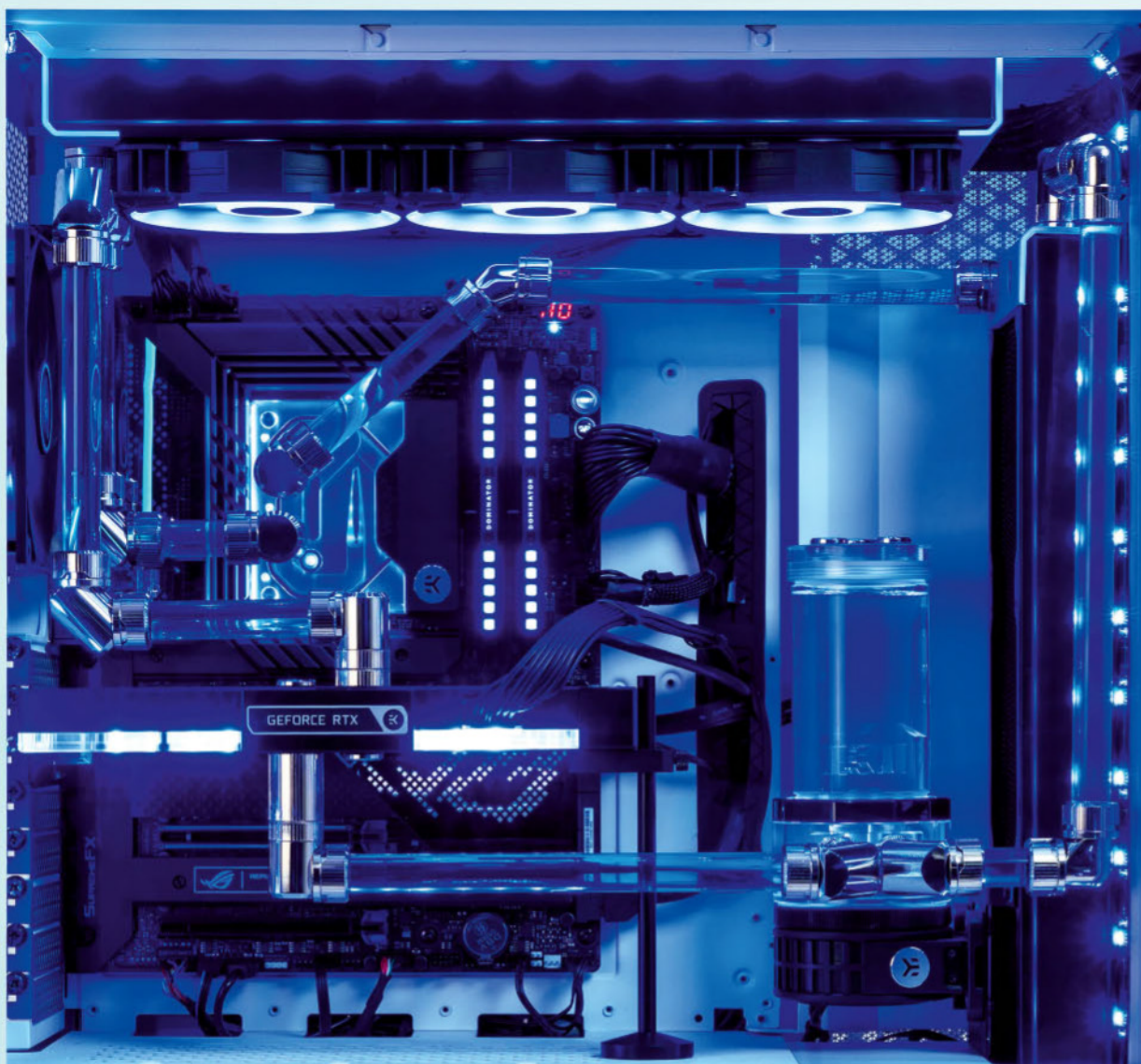
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# LIVING HELL

**DIABLO IV** refines the  
ARPG series for a new era

By TYLER COLP

**D**iablo IV has a surplus of corpses. For every gangly demon, there are piles of bones just waiting to pop out. They bulge out of their stomachs like a rodent in a snake. One slice and they come tumbling out. It's a bloody mess, but to my Necromancer, it's an opportunity.

To her, there's value in what a body

leaves behind. After all, bodies are a pain. They fight us at every turn and exist to get worse. Corpses, however, are a canvas. They birth friendly skeletons and deadly explosions. Those explosions lead to more corpses, and soon, my Necromancer is a spark in a world of gasoline.

Don't let the screenshots fool you: *Diablo IV* is an absurd game. It may be darker and more serious than *Diablo III*, but it still offers the bizarre pleasures of playing an action RPG. Numbers fly off of





## Diablo IV

» enemies, chests burst with loot, and you can be a Necromancer who disperses into mist and sets off every corpse in the room.

But no matter how ridiculous it is to have a pale woman pop corpses like they're balloons, *Diablo IV* remains devoted to its tight combat design. Lead class designer Adam Z Jackson is personally responsible for my Necromancer build and he knows how many players raved about it during the four-day beta in March. When I describe it to him over Zoom, he starts to nod before I'm even finished.

"It's very rare that I'll put a stake in the ground," he said. "But that

end, but your character's progression will ostensibly go on for as long as Blizzard updates the game. So as a class designer, Jackson doesn't speak like he's building a game, he speaks like he's building a foundation.

## PAVING THE WAY

And it starts with defining an identity for each class in the game: Barbarians, Druids, Rogues, Necromancers and Sorcerers. *Diablo IV*'s prologue drops you into the Fractured Peaks, a snow-covered wasteland, with little preamble. Less than ten seconds later, you're attacking wolves on the trail toward the nearest settlement. And after a

## DIABLO IV'S PROLOGUE DROPS YOU INTO THE FRACTURED PEAKS, A SNOW-COVERED WASTELAND, WITH LITTLE PREAMBLE

kind of thing is one just because it kills combat interaction. If you don't interact with enemies, if you don't interact with bosses, then it kind of defeats the entire game. It's fun to be powerful, and even to feel or be overpowered a little bit. But there are lines and – remember, everything's on a spectrum – that is outside of the spectrum."

*Diablo IV* has principles, or "pillars" as Jackson calls them, that anchor its design. In the 11 years since *Diablo III*, games have gotten bigger, and players expect them to last years, decades even. *Diablo IV*'s story will have a beginning and an

minute, you have your first skill, earned by spending a point in the game's skill tree.

Barbarians can pick up Flay, a nasty sword slice that causes the enemy to bleed and take damage over time. Sorcerers can take Spark, which sends out a bolt of electricity that repeatedly shocks enemies. Another minute goes by and you're level three. Flay can now be enhanced to make an enemy vulnerable and take increased damage. And Enhanced Spark gains the ability to zap multiple enemies at once.

Jackson says the opening minutes of the prologue are crucial for

**BELOW:** *Diablo IV*'s camera is zoomed in further so you can appreciate the extreme level of detail.

demonstrating to players what's in store for them. Originally, the Barbarian's Flay didn't cause a bleed until you spent another skill point. "But one of the things that we did a while back was we moved some type of functionality into the basic skill that told you what the fantasy and the types of builds and things that you could be thinking about going on later would be," he said. "That way, at level one, when you're first reading those basic skills, you kind of have an idea of the fantasies that we're presenting to you and the gameplay you're going to be chasing."

RPG players know what it's like to be presented with a massive, branching skill tree early in your adventure, and then to be asked to make a decision. In *Diablo IV*, those decisions aren't permanent. You can spend gold to refund a skill point at any time. And while there are plenty of tooltips to read, the skill tree is designed for you to find an aspect of the class you like and follow it all the way to the bottom of the tree. Druids can stack skills that inflict enemies







with poison, and Necromancers, like myself, can spend whatever it takes to make more corpses appear.

The entire process of spending skill points, equipping gear and navigating dungeons is slick – Blizzard slick. The developer, which is known for spending years refining

**ABOVE:** Inarius isn't happy with the state of Sanctuary and tells you so in a brief meeting.

the feel of its games, knows that action RPGs are just as much about clicking on enemies as they are about clicking through the menus. The monsters drop loot, you pick it up, and then you start comparing stats. *Diablo IV*'s user interface, at least in the beta, is nearly there, but players found its use of the Arial font uninspired for a series obsessed with looking like something your parents would confiscate.

But *Diablo IV* won't only be on PC, where you're hunched over at a desk and a few feet away from your monitor, nor will it only be played by people who can read any font. Lead UI designer Dorottya Kollo said accessibility, whether it's console players sitting back from their TV or people with dyslexia, are important. "Basically, everyone on the team has been watching streams and reading articles and just kind of taking notes," she said of the feedback from the beta. "Because it's all about learning from our audience, and just making sure that we make the game better and better."

Kollo and Jackson both acknowledge *Diablo IV*'s fluidity given its live service nature. Many things are subject to change over time; rules that were set before launch might be broken later. Even *Diablo III*'s launch had features that were either radically changed (legendary items) or removed entirely (the real money auction house). *Diablo IV*, as we play it this year, might well be unrecognisable down the line.

## RETURN TO DARKNESS

Few other games are as familiar as *Diablo*, though. There's comfort in going back to the OG, the game that has unabashedly been about killing loads of demons in a broken world. *Diablo IV*'s "return to darkness", Blizzard's favourite slogan to repeat while talking about the game, isn't just an invitation to return to the age-old *Diablo* habits, it describes the tonal reset for the game, too.

*Diablo IV* is literally a darker game than *Diablo III*. Your brightness setting can only do so much.

## SORCERESS OF SECRETS

*Diablo's original sorcerer had a distinct look, but the sequels mixed it up*



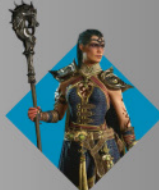
### HELLO, SORCERESS

*Diablo II*'s Sorceress drops the *World of Warcraft* style for a more subdued, but simple, look.



### WIZARD ERA

*Diablo III*'s armour customisation and dyes make the Wizard one of the most striking classes.



### THE WANDERER

*Diablo IV* blends the Sorceress' history up into a more realistic, dark fantasy appearance.





**ABOVE:** Lilith is respectful of the humans but clearly has intentions she won't reveal quite yet.

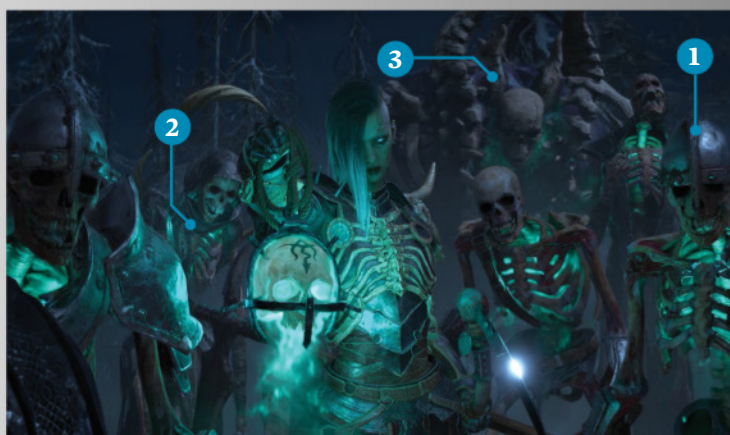
Sanctuary, the dying world of the human race, is a smear of shacks with lanterns dangling in the cold, night air. As I trekked through icy paths of the Fractured Peaks, I saw horses cleaved in two, abandoned campfires and flash-frozen bodies. On first impression, it felt like I was standing in the Lands Between, *Elden Ring*'s similar decaying world. The opening hours of FromSoftware's open-world masterpiece bask you in the verdant beauty of Limgrave, but eventually you're knee-deep in the underground Lake of Rot. *Diablo IV*'s opening area suggests that it will sit somewhere in the middle: the snow is grey, the rocks are charcoal, but the fires that people huddle around pierce through the muted tones. All the religious iconography and gore that's the series' signature is painted with Renaissance-style bleakness.

*Diablo IV*'s grim palette veers away from the colours of *Diablo III*, which can make the game's aesthetic seem more plainly dark fantasy, more Game of Thrones. It looks like an appeal to those who are tired of the



## THEM BONES

*These are the tales of the skeleton men*



1

### SKELETAL WARRIORS

Necromancers can summon Skeletal Warriors who can swarm your enemies. They can be specialised for defence or damage.

2

### SKELETAL MAGES

Skeletal Mages cast magic toward your enemies. They can be upgraded to deal shadow or cold damage, or made to explode for tons of damage.

3

### GOLEMS

Golems are the bruisers of the Necromancer's repertoire. In the beta, they could spawn corpses to explode, deal thorns damage, or buff you with attack speed.



*IV* isn't subtle about complicating this inevitable clash between the two. Outside the cathedral are the bloodied tools to torture those who have sinned and disgraced Inarius' name. Sidequests involve thieves manipulated by demons and families under threat of the church's militaristic rule. Unsurprisingly for a Blizzard game, neither side is really all that good, and the main story loves to remind you of that fact.

How your character fits into it is still unclear after having finished the first of four acts in the game – which you can do in any order. Lilith is an oddly sympathetic

cellars and monsters. Other players drifted in and out as I circled Kyovashad, helping me with world events and the massive world boss. *Diablo IV* is alive in a way the previous games haven't been, which is great for people who want to squeeze out every legendary item and stat increase, but a concern for anyone wanting a tight, story-driven experience. It's possible that *Diablo*'s live service era could favour one or the other and shift over time.

By the end of the beta, when I had easily squashed the game's tough bosses with my Necromancer's corpse party build, I could see where

## ON FIRST IMPRESSION, IT FELT LIKE

## I WAS STANDING IN THE LANDS BETWEEN, ELDEN RING'S SIMILAR DECAYING WORLD

villain, if only for her seemingly radical approach to ending the conflict that has left *Diablo*'s world in such a harrowing state, but it's possible she could have other, more insidious intentions that will slot her into the list of irredeemable women in Blizzard's stories.

*Diablo IV*'s biggest challenge will be taking the iconic parts of the series and synthesising them into something that can balance the gear-obsessed rampage with the nuanced storytelling of a world on its last days – and continue that for years to come. I spent my time in the beta talking to all of the NPCs and roaming the open world for hidden

it went too far. The complete lack of incentive to engage with *Diablo IV*'s challenges quickly stymies the drive to stay in the loot-hungry loop, as do the moments where its worldbuilding steps over the line of believable melancholy into misery porn. *Diablo IV*'s integrity as the next game you'll spend thousands of hours in relies on knowing where to place that restraint, and where to let your imagination run free. After seeing the scope of the game and speaking to the people responsible for that balancing act, I'm confident that *Diablo IV* will be – or at least become – the *Diablo* I've been waiting for. ■

whimsical dark fantasy that has infiltrated app stores and the free-to-play section on Steam. It loses a little personality in the process, but it might work, as long as the game's story is able to uphold the tone.

### MOTHER'S DAY

The mother of Sanctuary has returned and she's angry. After many years of the eternal conflict between angels and demons, she's ready to end it all with the unwitting help of humans. The game opens with the demon mother appearing before a congregation and recruiting them into her army. Your character is eventually influenced by her too, but the consequences of that remain mostly unknown by the end of the first act.

The Fractured Peaks is the home of Kyovashad, a guarded city where people gather to worship Lilith's ex-lover and the angelic father of Sanctuary, Inarius. Talk to people around the city and they'll tell you that the prophecy says Inarius will defend the people from her. *Diablo*

**BELOW:** Necromancers have an entire army of skeletons to help them carve through dungeons.





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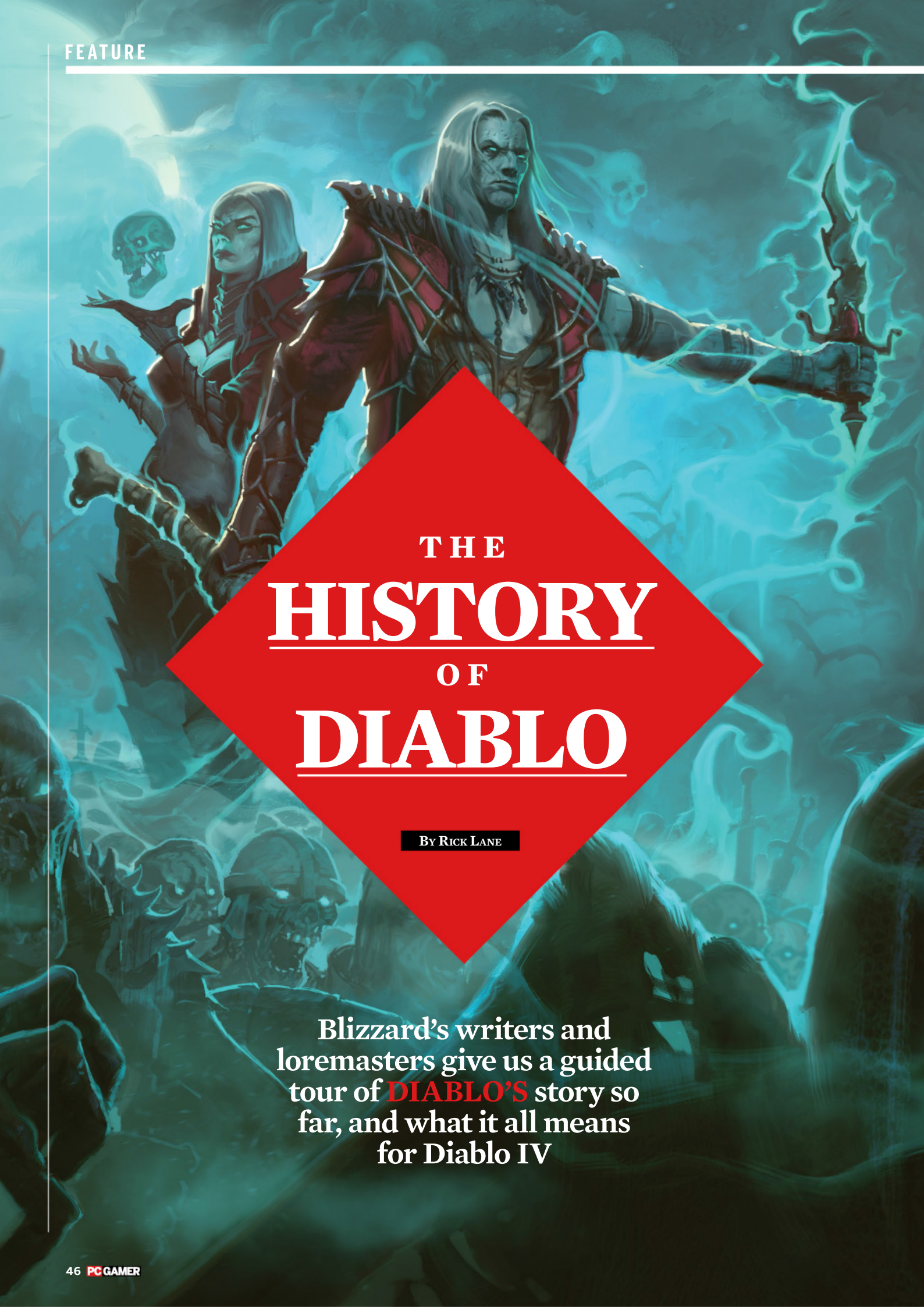
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# THE HISTORY OF DIABLO

By RICK LANE

Blizzard's writers and loremasters give us a guided tour of **DIABLO'S** story so far, and what it all means for Diablo IV



# DIABLO

RELEASED 1997 | DEVELOPER Blizzard North | PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment

## Where it all began

**W**hen you think of what's important in a *Diablo* game, story might not be the first thing that springs to mind. Yet like all Blizzard's games, *Diablo*'s mix of monster bashing and looting is built upon a vast lore foundation. It's a complex web of shadowy creation myths, biblical conflicts between angels and demons, and nations and religions that rise and fall over the millennia.

It's also highly relevant to the upcoming *Diablo IV*, the story of which ties into some of the most primordial events in the game's deep past. So we took a guided tour of *Diablo*'s history with Blizzard's writers and loremasters, to better understand the backdrop to *Diablo IV*'s own dark fantasy tale. Along the way, we also found out how *Diablo*'s fictional history is shaped, and what new events might reshape this history when *Diablo IV* is unleashed on the world in June.

The history of *Diablo* has three beginnings. First, there's the beginning according to the game's own lore, which takes place in the

deep mists of the past. After eons of conflict between the angels of the High Heavens and the demons of the Burning Hells, the three Lords of Hell, Mephisto, Baal and Diablo, were exiled to the Mortal Realm. There, they sowed chaos among humanity until the Horadrim, a group of magi formed by the archangel Tyrael, trapped these Prime Evils in three soulstones. The Horadrim buried Diablo's soulstone into the earth, then founded a monastery atop it.

### BLIZZARD HIRES LORE

### HISTORIANS TO COLLABORATE THE FICTIONAL HISTORIES OF GAMES

The second beginning comes in 1997, when the original *Diablo* was released. Enter the town of Tristram, which formed around the ruins of the old monastery, its purpose long forgotten. Enter King Leoric, who rebuilds the monastery into a Cathedral, and appoints a man named Lazarus as its Archbishop. Re-enter Diablo, who manipulates Lazarus into breaking the soulstones, then possesses King Leoric and his

son Prince Albrecht, using Leoric's armies to wage terror in Tristram and across the wider the Kingdom. Enter the player, who arrives in Tristram and begins the long descent beneath the cathedral to confront Diablo.

### SOULSTONE

Finally, there's the third beginning, which occurs around 2005. This is when Blizzard hires lore historians to collate the fictional histories of games like *Diablo*. Before this, Blizzard had no formal methodology for tracking the internal history of its games, so there's little original documentation from the first two *Diablo* games. "[I] hand-transcribed all of the words said in *Diablo, II* and *Lord of Destruction*," Copeland says. The original *Diablo* ends with the player descending to the Hells and defeating Diablo. The player's character takes Diablo's soulstone and pierces their own head with it, in an attempt to contain the essence of the Prime Evil. ■



LEFT: Little documentation survives from the first two *Diablo* games.

### CHARACTER PROFILE



#### DECKARD CAIN

One of the most notable characters in the storyline, Deckard Cain was the village Elder of Tristram, and one of the foremost scholars in the Horadric Order. He served as tutor to Prince Aidan and had close ties to Adria, the witch who would eventually betray the player's character in *Diablo III*. After Aidan became corrupted by Diablo into the Dark Wanderer, Cain was left caged in the ruins of Tristram, before being rescued by the heroes of *Diablo II* and aiding them in their quest to pursue Diablo. In *Diablo III*, Cain is involved in the early game's quest to ascertain the truth behind the falling star, but is killed by the Dark Coven cultist leader Maghda.



# DIABLO II

RELEASED 2000 | DEVELOPER Blizzard North | PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment

## Bigger, better and more brutal

**D***iablo II* kicks off with a killer twist. In their attempt to contain the Lord of Terror's evil within themselves, the hero you played in the original game becomes corrupted, blighting the land with demons wherever they walk. "There's always a cost to being a hero in this universe," says Matt Burns, principal writer at Blizzard. "You might lose some of your allies. You might lose yourself to evil you're fighting."

The sequel also broadens the canvas across which *Diablo's* story is painted. Whereas the first game mostly takes place in the warrens beneath Tristram's cathedral, *Diablo II* sees the player travelling across the world of Sanctuary as they track down the Dark Wanderer. As this chase unfolds, the game expands upon the lore ideas introduced in the first game, with Diablo seeking to

liberate the two other Lords of Hell from their hidden soulstone prisons.

It isn't merely the Lords of Hell whose role is more prominent in *Diablo II*. The game also provides greater insight into the High Heavens. Tyrael, the angel who formed the Horadrim, plays a direct role in *Diablo II*, attempting to stop the Dark Wanderer from releasing Baal from his prison. Tyrael is no match for two Prime Evils, however, and is injured in the ensuing fight,

**TYRAEL IS NO MATCH FOR TWO**

**PRIME EVILS, HOWEVER, AND IS**

**INJURED IN THE ENSUING FIGHT**

leaving the task of pursuing the Prime Evils to the player. "This idea of angels and demons and humans... when you're trapped in the middle of these higher powers, these dark powers and light powers, I think it's going to bleed into every aspect of your life," Burns says. "There's always this constant struggle between these two forces that affects everything."

The player confronts and defeats Mephisto in Travinical, then travels to

the Hells for a showdown with Diablo. Emerging victorious, the hero shatters the soulstones of both Diablo and Mephisto on the Anvil of Annihilation in the Hells' own forge.

### BAAL ESCAPES

But this isn't the end of the story, which is continued in *Diablo II's* expansion, *Lord of Destruction*. While Mephisto and Diablo are defeated, Baal escapes, and lays siege to the mountainous lands of Arreat with the goal of corrupting the Worldstone. Inside the Worldstone chamber, the player defeats Baal, but not before the Worldstone is corrupted. This forces the archangel Tyrael to take extreme measures, destroying the Worldstone in an explosion that destroys Arreat.

The events of *Diablo II* have significant ramifications for two of the game's playable classes. At the game's outset, the Rogues see their monastery destroyed by the Dark Wanderer, while the Land of Arreat in *Lord of Destruction* is home to the Barbarian classes. "[They] had their way of life completely shattered by the events of *II*", says Copeland. "They aren't the same people. So that story has definitely changed in the decades as the series progressed." ■

### CHARACTER PROFILE



#### MARIUS

A key figure in the events of *Diablo II*, Marius enters the story as a vagrant who is present

during the Dark Wanderer's destruction of the Rogue Monastery. Compelled to follow the Dark Wanderer, Marius accompanied him to the Tomb of Tal Rasha, and was tricked into releasing the Prime Evil Baal from his prison. Shamed by his actions, Marius is convinced by Tyrael to destroy Baal's soulstone. But seeing the three Prime Evils gathered as Diablo enters Hell drives Marius insane, and he ends up in an asylum. Baal finds Marius in the asylum, and kills the vagrant to retrieve his soulstone, sparking the events of *Lord of Destruction*.

**BELOW:** *Diablo II* greatly expands upon *Diablo's* storyline.







# DIABLO III

RELEASED 2012 | DEVELOPER Blizzard Team 3 | PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment

## The most controversial one, but crucial to the story

**S**et 15 years after the events of *Diablo II*, *Diablo III* returns to Tristram (now known as New Tristram) and the cathedral where the nightmare began. Accompanied by his ward Leah, the Horadrim sage Deckard Cain continues his research into the cathedral, when a star falls from the sky and strikes the building, burying Cain in a whole mess of rubble. That fallen star turns out to be the archangel Tyrael, who has abandoned the High Heavens to warn Sanctuary of an invasion by two Lesser Evils, Belial and Azmodan.

While searching for Tyrael's identity, Deckard Cain is killed by a cultist leader named Maghda. Afterward, Leah, Tyrael and the player pursue Azmodan and Belial to the city of Caldeum. There they encounter Leah's mother Adria, and learn that the key to defeating the pair is a

mysterious artefact known as the Black soulstone.

Leah and the player succeed in trapping Belial and Azmodan in the Black soulstone. But Adria betrays the pair. Revealing that she is a servant of Diablo, Adria uses Leah as a vessel to empower the Lord of Terror. The revived Diablo proceeds to assault the High Heavens. Together, Tyrael and the player travel to the High Heavens

**WHILE SEARCHING FOR TYRAEL'S IDENTITY, DECKARD CAIN IS KILLED BY A CULTIST LEADER**

for a final confrontation with Diablo, destroying his physical manifestation, although the Black soulstone is lost in the fight.

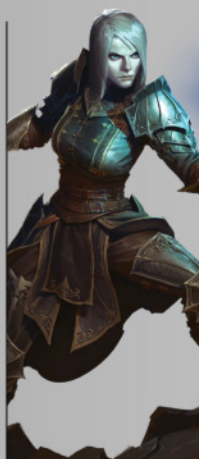
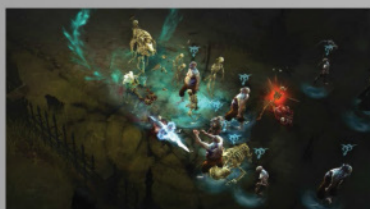
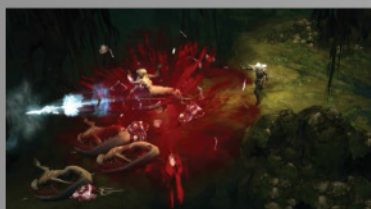
Alongside the key events in the plot itself, *Diablo III* has major ramifications for what happens both before and after its own story. *Diablo*

**TOP:** *Diablo III*'s more colourful aesthetic was controversial, but the story is as dark and brooding as ever.

*III* retcons the first two games, reframing the original protagonist (who becomes the Dark Wanderer of *Diablo II*) as Prince Aidan, the eldest son of the tragic King Leoric. Copeland explains Blizzard's process when it comes to reworking previous events: "What I've found when it comes to creative sessions is the word no, or being 'lore police', as it were, usually doesn't help the creative process" he says. "We want to make sure that we give [writers] the suggestions to make their story work, because at the end of the day, we're all trying to tell cool stories.

### DARK HARVEST

The other crucial story change that *Diablo III* leads to is the climactic events of the *Reaper of Souls* DLC. After defeating Diablo, the angel Tyrael tries to hide the Black soulstone with the aid of the newly reformed Horadric order, but his efforts are undermined by another angel, Malthael, who steals the soulstone as part of his own plan to exterminate humanity. "Everybody's gut instinct is to think angels equal good demons equal bad, but as we see in the past story of *Diablo* there are some angels that are awful," Copeland says. "Malthael being the aspect of death that culled humanity being a prime example." ■





# DIABLO IV

RELEASED June 2023 | DEVELOPER Blizzard Team 3/Blizzard Albany | PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment

## The most ambitious and story-centric Diablo game yet

**A**ll of these events, 20 years' worth of *Diablo* stories, bring us to the start of *Diablo IV*. Which makes it ironic that, to understand *Diablo IV*'s story, you need to go right back to the beginning. *Diablo IV*'s story links directly to the creation myth of Sanctuary itself.

The central antagonist of *Diablo IV* is Lilith. The daughter of Mephisto, Lord of Hatred, Lilith was a minor figure in the *Diablo* storyline, appearing primarily in *Diablo: The Sin War*, a trilogy of novels written by Richard A Knaak. In lore terms, however, Lilith's role in the story is enormous. Lilith is the creator of Sanctuary, the mortal realm where the Nephalem exist.

So how does a demon's offspring end up creating the home realm of the entire human race? It goes back to the endless conflict between the High Heavens and the Burning Hells that has been burning since time immemorial. "At a certain point in that eternal conflict, there were some folks that were disenfranchised with it," Copeland explains. "Endless conflict, right? That doesn't sound like something I want to sign up for."

One of these individuals was the angel Inarius, a lieutenant of Tyrael. During one of the infinite battles between Heaven And Hell, Inarius was captured by Lilith, who planned to torture him. "But Inarius was like, 'Thank you, you're doing me a favour in death.' And he explained why he felt this way – there's no winning this

conflict. So just take me out and other angels will take my place," Copeland adds.

Lilith, however, saw a use for Inarius' cynicism. "As the Daughter of Hatred, that whole family loves to play 4D chess," Copeland continues. "What really gets them up in the morning is turning kingdoms against one another. So Lilith gave her spiel, saying, 'I feel the same way you do. Let's find some likeminded people, and escape. Let's take the single most important object in the entire eternal conflict [the Worldstone], steal it,

**BELOW:** *Diablo IV* returns to the more gothic presentation of the first two games.

**FAR RIGHT:** Inarius is a complex figure, one humanity may not be able to trust.

create a world of our own, and we'll call it Sanctuary."

This is exactly what Lilith and Inarius did. Taking a bunch of angels and demons with them, the two rebels abandoned the endless conflict, creating their own world to hide from it in. And all was well, until Lilith and Inarius got frisky one night, and all the other angels and demons did too, producing a new race of creatures that become the Nephalem.

The Nephalem were a side-effect of creating Sanctuary, and as such, there was a debate between the angels and demons over what to do with them. Lilith made the decision for everyone, however, killing all the rebels to protect her children from potential harm. Appalled by this, Inarius banished Lilith from Sanctuary to the abyss.

### LILITH RETURNS TO SANCTUARY FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE HER BANISHMENT



## HISTORY

How events unfolded

### THE DAWN DATE UNKNOWN

The unfathomable spirit Anu casts all evil out from itself, creating the first Prime Evil, Tathamet. They fight and destroy each other, laying the foundation for all creation.

### THE GREAT CONFLICT DATE UNKNOWN

The High Heavens and Burning Hells are created, and the endless fight between angels and demons begins. Eons later, Inarius and Lilith steal the Worldstone together.

### THE CREATION OF SANCTUARY DATE UNKNOWN

Inarius and Lilith create Sanctuary. Lilith kills the rebel angels and demons to protect them from repercussions. Aghast, Inarius banishes Lilith.

### THE BIRTH OF CIVILISATION CIRCA -2300

As millennia pass, civilisations form on Sanctuary. Later, a mage named Jere Hajash summons the first demon into Sanctuary.

### THE SIN WAR -1809

Lilith unlocks the hidden powers of a Nephalem named Uldyssian, sparking a three way war, Hells and Sanctuary. As he grows in power, Uldyssian sacrifices himself.



## The History of Diablo



## THE MUMMY RETURNS

*Diablo IV* begins when Lilith returns to Sanctuary for the first time since her banishment. “We’re at the centre of the eternal conflict between angels and demons,” says Matt Burns. “The clearest embodiment of that is through Lilith and Inarius. Drawing them both together, back on the world, at the same time. It sets the stage to explore that original *Diablo* theme of being at the centre of the eternal conflict as a human.”

And humanity is fundamentally unprepared for Lilith’s return, because Sanctuary is still reeling from the events of *Diablo III: Reaper of Souls*. “Fifty percent of humanity was culled by Reapers across Sanctuary,” Copeland says. “These groups and these communities are still licking their wounds and healing from the devastation that rocked their entire world.” As well as leaving humanity shellshocked, the events of *Reaper of Souls* has also punched gaping holes in the established hierarchy, holes *Diablo IV*’s writing team has enjoyed filling in. “They get to explore the power vacuums that opened up as entire institutions were annihilated, and what filled that power vacuum in the time since the *Reaper of Souls*.”

These world shaping events, all of which occur before the story of *Diablo IV* kicks off proper, run alongside two major changes in how

## CHARACTER PROFILE



## TYRAEL

Among the angels of the High Heavens, Tyrael is humanity’s most staunch advocate,

having stood against not only the forces of Hell on behalf of Sanctuary, but the wills of the Heavens too. Tyrael isn’t afraid to make sacrifices for the greater good. His destruction of the Worldstone causes massive collateral damage to the surrounding area of Arreat. But he also does not value his own existence any higher than those he tries to protect. At the outset of *Diablo III*, Tyrael sacrifices his immortality to warn Sanctuary of Belial and Azmodan’s invasion, living the rest of his life as a mortal being.



## FEATURE

### *The History of Diablo*

» this new *Diablo* tells its story. First, *Diablo IV*'s approach to storytelling is more cinematic than in previous games, with the action frequently interspersed with either choreographed cutscenes, or extended dialogue sequences that take place from the game's standard overhead viewpoint.

"From the beginning, the direction really was to create a world full of very relatable, grounded characters," Burns explains. "To do that we had to flesh out their back stories, flesh out their arcs over the course of the story. And that meant creating more scenes with them, more moments with them where you could discover who these characters are, discover what their motivations are, what issues are plaguing them, and carry those forward in their character arcs throughout the rest of the story."

#### OPEN BOOK

The other crucial change, which also feeds into this greater emphasis on storytelling, is that *Diablo IV* has an open world structure. Whereas previous *Diablo* games funnelled players in a sequence of varyingly open-ended areas, *Diablo IV* takes place across a much larger landmass that players can wander through in any direction from the start. This has a couple of ramifications for *Diablo IV*'s story. To start with, it needs to be

#### CHARACTER PROFILE



##### DIABLO

Al'Diablo, the Lord of Terror, is the youngest of the three Prime Evils, and also the most dangerous, primarily because of his uncanny ability to evade destruction and subjugation. Diablo succeeds in corrupting Prince Aidan to his will despite being bested in combat, and survives his defeat at the end of *Diablo II* thanks to the intervention of the Witch Adria. Despite being beaten again in *Diablo III*, the actions of the angel Malthael result in Diablo's soul being freed with the shattering of the Black soulstone. As of *Diablo IV*, the Lord of Terror's whereabouts is unknown. But I'd bet my soul we will find out sooner or later.







more flexible. “We had to account for that nonlinearity. So for instance, if a character goes to Dry Steppes before Fractured Peak zone, we created some different kinds of conversations to account for that in the narrative,” Burns explains.

Moreover, *Diablo IV*’s open world simply creates a much larger narrative space to fill. “There are all these cities, towns, villages everywhere. And all of them have these NPC characters that we created little conversations and gossips for, just to make each of these places feel alive and make it feel like there’s regular people living here and going about their daily lives,” Burns elaborates. “As you stroll into town, you can hear little snippets of their lives spoken, right? So that again was just to breathe some life into the world.”

But Blizzard can’t just chop up *Diablo*’s lore bible and sprinkle it through Sanctuary, hoping players understand it. Above everything else, the core tenet of *Diablo* is immediacy. The game must be engaging and comprehensible from the first whack of a monster, even if you’re unfamiliar with the other games in the series.

**FAR LEFT:** *Diablo IV*’s story reaches deep into the series’ past.

**ABOVE:** Accessibility remains a key concern at Blizzard. “No required reading whatsoever,” says Copeland.



Burns is keen to stress that this is very much the case with *Diablo IV*. “We really crafted the story so that someone who doesn’t know anything about *Diablo* can just come in and start playing,” he says. “There is a huge cast of new characters in *Diablo IV*, so you’re learning about who they are and what they’re up to.”

That said, for people who are

story will also expand upon broader aspects of the series’ lore, the role of the Horadrim being a major example of this. The bookish group of magi founded by Tyrael has always been central to the series, but they tend to hover on the periphery of the story, with most of the player’s knowledge of the sect funnelled through the character of Deckard Cain. With *Diablo IV*, Burns is passionate about bringing the Horadrim into sharper focus. “I was always excited to bring the Horadrim story forward, and work on characters who would be a part of that group. In this world of *Diablo IV* where it’s pretty tough times, what are the Horadrim doing? How have they survived over the decades? What are they up to now?”

## SHADES OF GREY

One final point before we abandon Sanctuary to its fate. *Diablo* has always revelled in darkness and tragedy. As Copeland puts it “no good deed goes unpunished on Sanctuary.” *Diablo IV* emphasises this darker side both aesthetically and in the narrative. But it also strives to offer a more ambiguous

## DIABLO IV TAKES PLACE ACROSS A MUCH LARGER LANDMASS THAT PLAYERS CAN WANDER THROUGH

familiar with *Diablo*’s lore, there will be plentiful threads *Diablo IV* picks up. One example is Lorath Nar, the errant Horadrim voiced in *Diablo IV* by Ralph Ineson. “Last time we saw him was in *Reaper of Souls*. He was a strapping young lad, full of hopes and dreams,” Copeland says. “And then we see him in *Diablo IV* as a world-weary man. So you want to know that story. ‘What happened to Lorath? He was a Horadrim!’”

As well as zooming in on specific returning characters, *Diablo IV*’s

perspective on the battle between the Heavens and Hells. “The idea of having Lilith and Inarius here and how that affects everything, I think it makes for an interesting story, because you’re not sure who is on your side, who is the best choice for humanity?” Burns concludes. “That’s a big part of *Diablo IV*, that you’ll learn more about both of them and see what their true motivations are, what plans they have for humanity. That’s going to be a very interesting part of the experience.” ■

### THE DARK EXILE CIRCA 965

The Denizens of Hell rise up, exiling Mephisto, Baal, and Diablo to Sanctuary. Tyrael forms the Horadrim, bestowing them the three soulstones to imprison the Prime Evils.

### RISE OF ZAKARUM 1025

As a new faith named Zakarum gains traction. The town of Tristram is established. The Horadric Monastery falls into disuse, and the Horadrim fade into legend.

### THE DARKENING OF TRISTRAM 1258

*Diablo*: King Leoric converts the old Horadric monastery into a Zakarum cathedral, leading to the release of Diablo from his soulstone prison.

### HUNT FOR THE THREE 1264

*Diablo II*: Prince Aidan defeats Diablo, but is corrupted into the Dark Wanderer. Diablo releases Baal and Mephisto from their prisons, but is defeated in combat.

### THE END OF DAYS 1285

*Diablo III*: Tyrael returns to Sanctuary to warn them of the invasion. The player is tricked into freeing Diablo from the Black soulstone. Malthael culls half of humanity from Sanctuary.

### THE REIGN OF EMNITY 1315

*Diablo IV*: The remnants of humanity are beset by war, religious schisms, and famine. Lilith is summoned back into the mortal realm.





# THE NEW WEST

Five years old, **HUNT: SHOWDOWN** is still  
the most interesting FPS in gaming

*By Samantha Greer and Evan Lahti*



“he exquisite tension of the pervasive unknown,” is how general manager David Fifield describes *Hunt: Showdown* in a sentence.

Fifield joined Crytek in July 2022 after working on huge games like *Halo* and *Call of Duty* but fell in love with *Hunt*, determined to work on this weird multiplayer FPS. “The atmosphere is moody and forlorn, the landscape is corrupted and threatening, the tension builds with every step that you take, every noise that you hear... and that just keeps building and building, far longer than a typical shooter lets that build up before it just breaks into a gunfight.”

Anyone who’s stepped into *Hunt* knows exactly what Fifield is talking about. When it launched into Early Access five years ago, it made a strong impression by putting you in a hostile setting with disturbing AI monsters and other players, giving you cowboy-era technology to deal with them. That core experience has remained intact. In its three maps, plentiful overgrowth – maybe the most in the genre – obscures sight

lines and makes it possible to stage authentic ambushes. Listening is a rich skill within *Hunt*, with even a snapping twig in the woods being a helpful source of information. Half a decade later, its emphasis on atmosphere, audio-visual fidelity and gritty gunplay sets it apart from other shooters.

When it first launched, we were still learning the phrase for its format: ‘extraction shooter’. Competing teams of one, two, or three players, fighting over bounties and racing to ‘extract’ while dealing with AI enemies. There wasn’t much precedent for this sort of thing when *Hunt* arrived. Battle royale games emerged at the end of 2017, but they pitted humans against each other and forced them into confrontation. *Escape From Tarkov* had been released only the year before but its modern military world was a far cry from *Hunt*’s 19th century. It’s a choice that gives the game more than just a distinctive look.

“That tension is amplified by the time period. Weapons have these complex reload animations and period-accurate mechanisms,” Fifield explains. “I gotta make every shot count, because if I run out of these bullets it takes a long time to reload, it’s clunky and I’m vulnerable.” It’s the old technology that draws out every encounter and makes all sorts of weapons viable. Running at an enemy with an axe is a fair strategy when one miss will leave them open to a killing blow. Even the anachronistic weapons are rooted in the period. Of the Bomb Lance, one of *Hunt*’s more outlandish weapons (like a spear that can shoot dynamite), Fifield says, “Well, the technology to do this was there... it’s like combining a little bit of peanut butter and chocolate to make a period-accurate weapon that did not exist.” >



## "I ABSOLUTELY BELIEVE HUNT'S AUDIO IS WORLD CLASS"

Another key part of *Hunt*'s character are its supernatural AI enemies, an army of the dead and cursed that rarely kill you, but play a crucial role as resource eaters, noise emitters, and chaos causers. The shambling figures add to the sense of decay that pervades every inch of *Hunt*'s maps. A lot of ongoing multiplayer games want to (understandably) build colourful, welcoming spaces. *Fortnite* is a cartoon melting pot, *Apex Legends* stages a bright sci-fi frontier for its heroes. But here in the bayou, you have to step over dead horses. Otherworldly beasts turn barns and mines into their dens.

That atmosphere isn't carried by the aesthetics alone. "I absolutely believe *Hunt*'s audio is world class," Fifield tells me. I agree – this is one of the rare games you can win with your ears. A rustle of a bush, the wail of a horse, a single footstep, anything can be the thing that gives away a foe and saves your life. A recent patch tweaked gunfire in underground locations, muffling it to make it easier to distinguish from open-air fire. It's the ambient noises that sell it all though, the buzz of insects or the cries of monsters hidden from sight provide an unnerving din. The seasonal-event wildfire that was running in *Hunt* over the last two months wasn't just a sky-high firestorm that players had to move around, the blaze swallowed up sound with its deafening crackle, a sort of sound hazard that you could exploit.

**ABOVE:** Weapons take a while to reload, so you better not miss.

In almost all of these design decisions, what keeps me coming back to *Hunt* year after year is the way it arranges these threats, resources and systems in the environment, and steps back, giving players the agency to decide what to do with them. There's no artificial force pressuring players into confrontation, and your best performance of an evening might be three kills in a match. Maybe you survive against another team by the skin of your teeth and decide to call it a day. As Fifield points out "there is no shrinking circle, no deathmatch respawn, people aren't sprinting around", so you're free to play the game in myriad ways, and that means your enemies are wildly unpredictable, which keeps things fresh even after years of playing it.

Yet if there is one vital ingredient Fifield feels an extraction shooter lives or dies by, it's fairness. Or rather, the lack of it. "You have to embrace that it's not necessarily fair. One of us is going to live or die and that might be the person with the better gun or it might be the person with the worse gun." *Hunt*'s weapons are much more asymmetrical than its modern counterparts, and their quirks make selecting your loadouts a risk/reward choice. One of the game's most expensive rifles is the Avtomat, a functionally automatic rifle variant. It'll cost you over a thousand bucks and yet, when you're holding one, you often feel more fragile, afraid of losing it to a more careful player wielding a \$57 bow.

"We don't have any body armour, we don't have shields. Flesh and bone

### ANGLES OF ATTACK

Four ways to crack open Lawson Station, a popular stalemate spot

#### 1 BREAK IN THE SIDE WINDOW

Risky and noisy (watch out for traps), but this is a popular entry. Bring flashes or firebombs.

#### 2 PINCH THE FRONT AND BACK DOORS

They'll never expect you to just waltz in, right?



#### 3 DEATH FROM ABOVE

Up the ladder and over the roof, down the chute to drop right on your opponents.

#### 4 POST UP OUTSIDE

The best offence? Sitting still and camping, waiting for them to leave the protection of the train station.



is super vulnerable to a lot of basic weapons and so that lethality, puts at risk all those expensive things you bring in because one headshot and you're going down." It's this vulnerability that makes it all the more meaningful when a lowly 'whiteshirt' pulls an expensive Mosin Sniper off the corpse of an experienced and wealthy player.

### NEW OLD WEST

Though it can be played aggressively, *Hunt* asks more patience from its players than most of its peers in multiplayer FPS, particularly the kill-die-repeat track meet of *Call of Duty*. That intricacy can make it harder to explain and harder to learn. It also helps explain why the game, after five years, is getting steadily more popular. Through word of mouth, *Hunt* is steadily finding the people who appreciate its details. "We keep breaking all our records [for player numbers] every event, we keep getting more people in and more people stay," Fifield says.

One small but significant way *Hunt* has kept my attention is the surprising diversity of its hunters. It's



Owning a powerful gun helps, but it is far from a no-death guarantee.

**BELOW:** The game boasts excellent representation of different races and genders.

not atypical for games of this ilk to forego the inclusion of women or people of different races, often under the guise of historical accuracy. But *Hunt: Showdown's* legendary hunter lineup includes Chinese men and women, First Nations peoples, and other characters that more explicitly nod to the game's basis in North American history. It makes perfect sense to me that *Hunt's* world is as diverse as the real America of the time would have been.

"It's absolutely a deliberate goal in our process," Fifield confirms. "When people look at a lot of media, if they don't see familiar faces or a thing that resonates, they'll say, 'Yeah, that's not for me.'" To Fifield, inclusion is part of the game's narrative. "It fits with our secretive themes, the 'untold tales of unsung heroes,' so when we include traditionally marginalised groups and we put them in heroic or aspirational contexts, that's very woven into *Hunt's* DNA." Doing right by those groups is always an ongoing process for the team. "The First Nation groups that we brought in, we tried to be as respectful as we can, we constantly have discussions about what's representation over appropriation, we then also talk to sensitivity readers from these different groups."

Where does *Hunt* go from here? A priority now is helping new players get on board more smoothly. "We're working on improving the tutorial and having a more scripted tutorial with more explanations and what we would say is just better teaching than the existing training missions."

Players can expect that very soon according to Fifield. Further ahead the game is set to be upgraded to the latest version of CryEngine. "It currently runs on a legacy version from four years ago, so one of our major talking points across 2023 is gonna be about updating to the latest 5.11 version. So that's going to bring some gameplay and graphical enhancements." Doing so is going to take time, however, and players shouldn't expect it in the near future.

### HUNTING AHEAD

Though the truth is, for me, *Hunt* could never change and I would still keep coming back. Crytek ended 2022 with its most interesting seasonal event ever, but the game's nucleus remains as captivating now as when I first visited the bayou as a terrified idiot who ran around the swamp with a flashlight, one of the least-used items in the game. *Hunt's* relative complexity may make it feel impenetrable to players who tried it in 2019 or 2020 once and had no idea how to survive. Over time though, as experienced players speak its praises and offer advice, word of mouth has slowly drawn in more and more people who want something different from their multiplayer experience.

"We don't even know what our peak is," Fifield says with excitement, as the game's audience has never stopped growing. With the plans to transition to a newer version of its engine, it's clear *Hunt: Showdown* won't be replaced by a sequel, that Crytek still sees new potential in the game's second era. ■





# REVIEW

## HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

## DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

## EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

## THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

## OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

**00%-09%** Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

**Example** *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

**10%-19%** We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

**Example** *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

**20%-29%** Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

**Examples** *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

**30%-39%** An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

**Examples** *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

**40%-49%** Flawed and disappointing.

**Examples** *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

**50%-59%** Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

**Examples** *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

**60%-69%** There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

**Examples** *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

**70%-79%** A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

**Examples** *Prey, NieR: Automata*

**80%-89%** A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

**Examples** *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

**90%-94%** A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

**Examples** *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

**95%-96%** Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

**Examples** *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

**97%-100%** Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

**Find out more**  
[www.bit.ly/pcgreviews](http://www.bit.ly/pcgreviews)



## Brain wave

*Resident Evil 4* was a great game when it originally released back in 2005 and, after what can only be described as a truly fantastic remake, remains a great game in 2023. It's the second remake we've reviewed this year (the other being the equally good *Dead Space* remake) that has managed to update a beloved classic and, shock horror, actually made it genuinely better and more fun.

But that's the thing, right, there's no reason why old games can't be remade years later and not just given a token lick of paint, such as a simple resolution upgrade, but actually revisited properly and genuinely improved upon. I don't know about you, but I find the idea of playing classily upgraded classic games incredibly appealing, so let's see more of them.

*R. Jones*

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**LET US KNOW  
WHAT YOU THINK**  
Email us via [letters@pcgamer.com](mailto:letters@pcgamer.com) with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer





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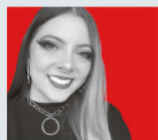
## This month's Cthulhu-dodging reviewers...



**IAN EVENDEN**  
Specialist in  
Going mad  
**Currently playing**  
*Everspace 2, Dreams in the Witch House*  
**This month**  
Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'l'yeht wga'n'aght fhtagn.



**RICH STANTON**  
Specialist in  
Kneecapping zombies  
**Currently playing**  
*Resident Evil 4*  
**This month**  
Shot many zombies in the head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.



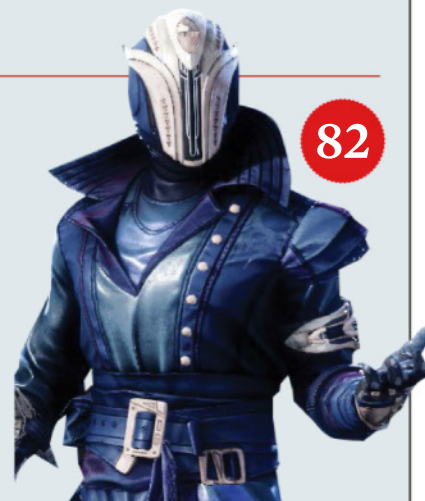
**MOLLIE TAYLOR**  
Specialist in  
Fisherman jumpers  
**Currently playing**  
*Dredge*  
**This month**  
Trawled the ocean depths for dark secrets that should of remained buried.



**PHIL SAVAGE**  
Specialist in  
Asinine banter  
**Currently playing**  
*Destiny 2: Lightfall*  
**This month**  
Tried desperately to find out what the Radial Mast actually is. He still doesn't know.



**TOM SYKES**  
Specialist in  
Changing TV channels  
**Currently playing**  
*Nightmare Zapper*  
**This month**  
Befriended a monster that had, actually, come to devour him. When will he learn!





# LOOTING STARS

**EVERSPACE 2** might be the Diablo in space we've always wanted

By Ian Evenden

**T**he fact that 2003's *Freelancer* never got a sequel is one of the greatest travesties in PC gaming. Digital Anvil's third-person space shooter plonked you into a galaxy with a linear storyline but enough freedom to trade and fight as it suited you. PC Gamer gave it 90%, calling it an "expertly crafted space adventure" and "one of the best examples of this genre we've ever seen". Remember that.

*Everspace 2* is not *Freelancer*. If anything, it's better. It's the same sort of third-person open worldish interplanetary adventure, *Diablo* in spaaaaaaace, an RPG in which you play a conglomeration of engines and lasers as much as its pilot, and a sequel to 2017's *Everspace*. It's different from its predecessor in one crucial way: the roguelike elements are gone. In *Everspace*, death was inevitable, baked into the game so that credits earned during a run could be used to buy perks and improve your character for the next one. Not so in *Everspace 2*, where death merely brings up the reload checkpoint screen and a chance to try again.

The original *Everspace* game loop was apparently not as popular as it could have been, so German developer Rockfish has reverted to type. The studio's fish-favouring founders were also behind Fishlabs,

which made the *Galaxy on Fire* games (third-person space shooters, in case there was any doubt) and was acquired by Deep Silver in 2013. Some of the best games ever to

feature a protagonist named Keith, the three *Galaxy on Fire* titles saw travel between star systems, combat with pirates, trading routes between planets and space stations, and mysterious portals.

With *Everspace 2*, therefore, it would be tempting to make the old joke about Rockfish having made its game again, but that wouldn't be fair to the sheer amount of effort and artistry that's gone into creating this latest instalment. Following a Kickstarter campaign and a period in Early Access it's a very polished title, and can be a ridiculously good looking game, all floating rocks and wreckage, the trails left by other ships visible through clouds of dust that drift between

**It's a very polished title, and can be ridiculously good looking**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
Third-person looter shooter RPG in space

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£45

**DEVELOPER**  
Rockfish Games

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Threadripper 2950X, 64GB RAM, GeForce RTX 3080

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[everspace.game](http://everspace.game)

objects. Minefields glow red in the darkness, radiation fields are speckled with golden particles you'll want to get close to before backing away swiftly. Stars cause explosions of bloom and flare when you turn to face them, while planets have concentric ring systems and automated installations are all blinking lights and chunky metal.

## FREE SPACE

And there's loot. Lots of loot. Shoot down a pirate, open a chest... err, cargo container, or come across something randomly floating in the void while roaming freely around, perhaps after a transport ship exploded long ago, and you'll get something. It might just be scrap metal or trade goods, it could be a new gun or a missile refill, or it could be something absolutely terrific you've never seen before.

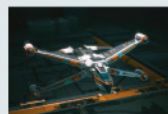
New ships can be bought from bases with ship dealers, but you'll need a lot of credits. Most ship upgrades, therefore, come in the form of new guns, secondary weapons such as homing missiles, and special attacks like a static electricity surge that can knock out nearby ships. These need to be charged before you can use them, like a *Street Fighter* super, and there's a recharging shield (some only charge when you boost), armour plating, nanobots to make repairs, damage limitation devices, modifications for your weapons so they do more damage, disable shields or earn you more XP from a kill.

It's a lot to keep track of, and if you're burning through missions and changing your weapons frequently, the time delay while a new module is fitted becomes something to watch out for as it leaves you unable to fire, making changing weapons something to plan rather than do on the fly.

XP feeds into your level, which determines the strength of the enemies you face outside of story missions as well as dictating the gear you can use. Your character attributes

## SHIPS IN THE NIGHT

What's on sale at the DMZ's shipyards?



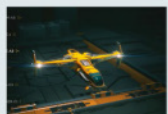
### OSPREY

The Osprey is a Striker, and wouldn't look out of place in Babylon 5's fighter bay. It's fast and handles well, but the shield is lacking.



### CYCLOPS

The Cyclops bomber is a ponderous ship, but can make its own warheads by damaging other craft. Shields help it get to its target.



### SCOUT

A scout is light and able to use speed to get out of trouble. Its weapons get enhanced range, to pick enemy craft off at a distance.



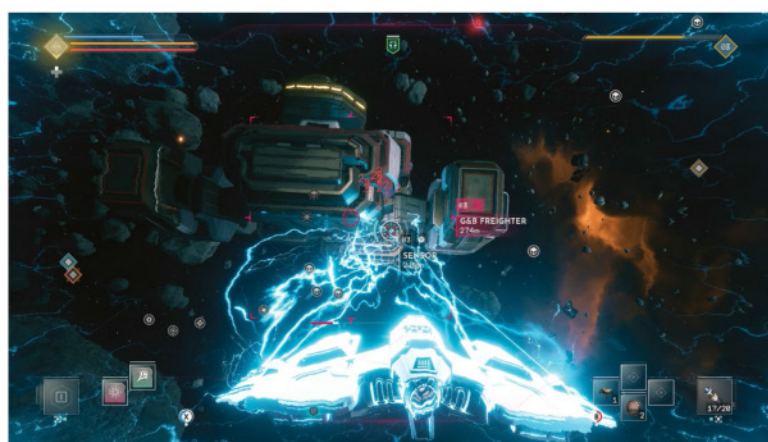
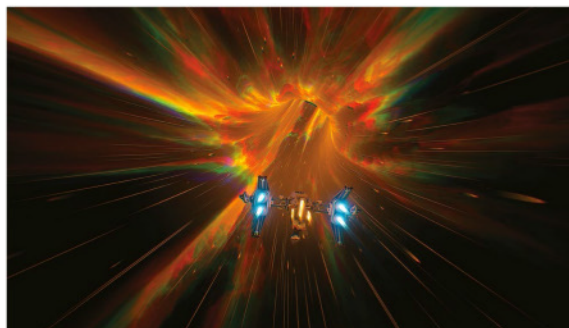
### VINDICATOR

The Vindicator class can turn wreckage into drones, which go after attacking craft in a swarm of lasers. It has shields, but lacks armour plating.





Cutscenes have a charming art style of their own.



**FAR LEFT:** Even in space, damage comes with a shower of numbers.

**BELOW:** Firing the right kind of guns paints the screen in coloured traces.





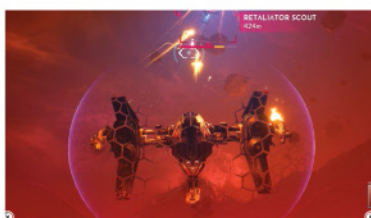


Boom. A trip back to the last checkpoint beckons.



**FAR RIGHT:** Your ship can fly over planets as well as in space.

**BELOW:** Flying across a planet's ring system is always a visual delight.





aren't linked to your ship but do dictate the gear you can equip it with, so if something is too good for you then you can't use it. Or perhaps you can, as investing a little time and resources at the crafting table can remove that level cap, allowing you to bolt on higher-level equipment you otherwise couldn't use, and come out all guns blazing. The way this ties the crafting system into your progression in a more interesting way than collecting ten mushrooms means it's less likely to be ignored.

### FLIGHT STIM

Ship handling is distinctly arcadey, with full 3D movement and the ability to precisely jet up and down, which comes in very handy when squeezing into small gaps. Enemies are fast, and combat doesn't become the turning contests seen in *Freelancer* where you latched onto an opponent's tail and followed it wherever it went until it went boom. Luckily, there's a generous lock on, leading fire indicator, and aim assist (which becomes stronger if you're using a gamepad). Combine this with homing missiles, and it can be hard to miss, though chipping away at a ship's shields while making sure your own recharges, and avoiding incoming fire, is a skill in itself. It can feel as if the entire galaxy is against you, filled as it is with foes, including bosses and elites. Enemies come in waves, with another batch appearing nearby once you've taken one group down, giving you the option of going after them or not.

Turning off inertial dampening for a more Newtonian approach to propulsion, and moving into first-person view, make the game a more tricky proposition. The cockpit perspective is hamstrung by the need to frequently pick things up with your ship's grabber – a graphically satisfying thing if seen from the chase camera as magnetic field lines fill and distort the screen, but which blocks your view in first-person, making it all but impossible to use.

There's no ray tracing, as screen-space global illumination is apparently good enough, and an RTX 3080 had no problems keeping the game purring away in 4K. DLSS 2.0 is supported too, as are various flight sticks and HOTAS controllers,

though mouse and keyboard or a gamepad also work. Its system requirements are relatively mild, though Steam Deck optimisation wasn't part of the Kickstarter and is therefore a lower priority.

### COLONY WARS

You don't need to have played the previous game to pick up *Everspace 2* and fly off. As Adam Roslin, a clone pilot with the memories and piloting skills of his DNA donor, who blew up a lot of things in *Everspace*, finds himself working for a mining company under an assumed name, trying to shoot enough space anemones and defend against enough pirates to earn a ticket out of the DMZ at the edge of human-colonised space. The zone is left over from a war against aliens, and there is plenty of extraterrestrial life to find, much of it based on aquatic life.

Your ship is a single-seat fighter with some cargo capacity, and the ability to swap out modules and weapons. You never get out of it, except in cutscenes which are voiced but rendered in a hand-drawn style. Supporting characters join your home base crew, bringing their expertise in the form of perks you unlock with credits and resources.

If you've ever played *Elite*: *Dangerous* offline as a bounty hunter,

you'll recognise a lot of what's going on here. There are three ways to travel faster than your thrusters can manage, one to be used within systems, one for larger distances, and even longer-range jumpgates. When you're measuring trips in light-seconds, unknown signals appear to drag you off course into a pirate-infested rescue or a large ship stuck in a minefield. At least there's an autopilot, and you don't need to time your descent from FTL perfectly to avoid overshooting your destination.

### ALONE IN THE DARK

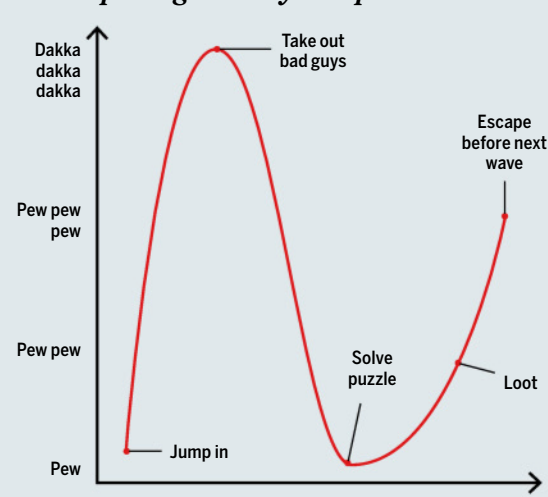
*Everspace 2* is a stubbornly single-player game, with no shared universe or even co-op, and this means missions outside the main story can begin to feel a bit samey. You jump into a new area, explore some ruins, avoid hazards, wait until the red dots get closer and shoot them, complete what you came for then leave.

Every system is full of interesting things and generally contains a puzzle, however, and this helps to keep your attention engaged. It may just be moving debris, or slotting power cores into sockets to switch on some mechanism or giant space mining laser. Planetary surfaces contain caverns full of bandits to clear out (like *Skyrim* without the fire wizards holed up in lonely towers, although perhaps everyone in this game is a fire wizard of sorts) and you'll find something similar inside asteroids, the experience of flying through them very much like being underwater. The 3D movement is extremely useful here, as you squeeze through gaps and chase in circles around pillars of rock.

So, an expertly crafted space adventure? Yes. One of the best examples of this genre we've ever seen? Also yes, with the caveat that it's a style of game that's been sadly under-represented in recent years. The lack of heavy simulation elements and emphasis on combat makes this a game that's perfect for a quick blast as well as longer play sessions, but it's also a satisfying and, thanks to all the side missions, really quite long adventure. ■

## THE PEW-PEW FACTOR

How exploring a new system pans out



### PC GAMER VERDICT

Shooting, looting and RPGing in space has rarely looked so good as it does in Rockfish Games' *Everspace 2*.

85



# GRIM FARRAGO

In **DREAMS IN THE WITCH HOUSE**, starvation could be the least of your problems

By Ian Evenden

**A**rkham, Massachusetts, 1929. Walter Gilman, a man who should probably know better, rents a room in a house with an evil reputation, and stubbornly refuses to leave when it turns out to be infested with unearthly vermin. Maybe it's because his aunt has paid the rent in advance, or maybe he likes the magenta figure that walks out of the glowing door that appears at night. Perhaps astral planes full of eyes and polyhedrons excite him. Perhaps we will never know.

*Dreams in the Witch House* is based on a Cthulhu Mythos story by Lovecraft that isn't considered one of his best. The game, a point-and-click survival and library simulator, finds Walter in the cold, rat-infested attic ready for the cold, rainy spring term at Miskatonic University, where he's studying physics and maths as well as working on his side theory about the interconnectedness of science and the occult.

Elsewhere, witches have plans for him, and he may find himself extremely interconnected with the occult indeed. The goal of the game is simply to survive for two months while Walter's health and sanity are chipped away.

And while it may look like a puzzle-solving adventure as you dig tweezers out of floorboards to pry broken keys out of locks, much of the game involves seeing to Walter's needs. He gets hungry, cold, wet, ill, insane... and he especially gets broke. An allowance arrives each week, there are financial bonuses for passing exams, and he can do odd jobs, but with food, medicine, newspapers, long underwear and more to buy, it goes quickly. He's generally moaning about something, but his time is as limited as his income while his problems outnumber both.

## UNEARTHLY GEOMETRY

Each day, you study your to-do list and wallet, decide what you're going to do, do it, then try to deal with

Walter's complaints. The university library is an important location, but is a warren of busywork. To get a book, Walter must know about it, so needs

to look it up in the index. Then go to the right section (there's also a restricted section, where the more interesting occult books reside), and remember the author's name because that's how the books are

sorted. You might need to move a ladder, as Walter isn't intelligent enough to do that himself, then get the book down. You can take it home

**The goal of the game is simply to survive for two months**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
Survival adventure in the Cthulhu mythos

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£9.30

**DEVELOPER**  
Atom Brain Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Bonus Stage Publishing

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Threadripper 2950X, 64GB RAM, Geforce RTX 3080

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[twitter.com/atombraingames](https://twitter.com/atombraingames)

if you've done the fetch quest to get a library card, or read it at a table. When you're done with it, you need to return it.

All the time the clock is ticking, your sanity is eroding, your tiredness makes it hard to concentrate. Truly, this is a game that speaks to the experience of living in our modern world. Yet there are other worlds to explore too, with a monster-infested maze and a witch's hut haunting Walter's dreams, where he is whisked away down a purple tunnel, and bitten by a man-faced rat. It gets to the point that, while a good night's sleep would be helpful for his stats, you hope for a dream as they're the most interesting parts of the game.

The pixel graphics and lack of voice-acting make for a disconnect between Walter and the player, the way Walter's blank face announces that he can't take it any more and is contemplating suicide with the same expression with which he moans about being a bit cold robs those moments of pathos. There are also some frustrating lapses in internal logic. Walter can stand on a chair to search shelves in a neighbour's room, but to change the lightbulb in his own he must go downstairs to get a ladder, even though there's a chair right there. The game also autosaves, which is good, but if you've just starved to death a save that sees you with no money and no way of getting food isn't much use.

Dying necessitates a reload or restart to do it all again, but while the game has some replay value it doesn't give enough of a feeling of progression, and nor is its main character engaging enough, to make doing so too many times anything other than a descent into madness. ■

## WHICH HOUSE?

*Dreadful places to stay in PC Games*



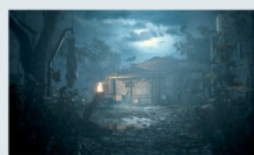
**ARKHAM BOARDING HOUSE**  
We don't know what's worse, the rat hole in the wall, the portal, or the dodgy wiring.



**EDISON MANSION**  
Not only home to a mad scientist and his son Weird Ed, but there are dungeons too.



**HENRY'S APARTMENT**  
With its locked door, portal and supernatural manifestations, he's not selling this any time soon.



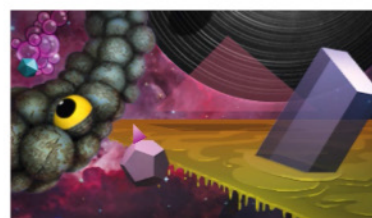
**THE BAKER RANCH**  
A home riddled with trapdoors, a mould problem and the family of cannibals that lives there.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Dreams in the Witch House* is interesting, but the repetitive presentation here renders it dull.

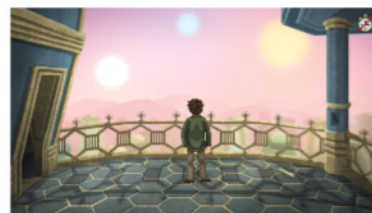
**65**





LEFT: Nothing weird going on here.

BELOW LEFT: So we're not on Tatooine, then.





# LEON ME

The **RESIDENT EVIL 4** remake isn't the greatest game ever made: this is just a tribute

By Rich Stanton

**M**uch like Leon S Kennedy, Capcom was never in for an easy ride with this one. There are games so forward-thinking and complete that they shape entire corners of our industry. In *Resident Evil 4's* case, every third-person game since has worn its love for Capcom's masterpiece on its over-the-shoulder sleeves: *Gears of War*, *Dead Space* and *The Last of Us* run because Capcom showed them how to walk. This is a remake of a game that remade a genre.

Capcom almost managed it and, for the longest time, you'll think it did. The opening is outstanding, streamlining the original route into the village in order to get you into the first big set piece: a knock-down drag-out village brawl that, almost immediately, takes place with the constant sound of a chainsaw revving as its malicious owner chases Leon everywhere.

I played on Hardcore difficulty, which is recommended for those who've completed the original game, and the name fits. I must have died in this encounter six times before re-adjusting and beginning to figure out the endless little tricks baked

into Leon's moveset and the enemy behaviour. If there's one thing you'll realise very quickly in this game it's that, after the rather flavourless *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis*, Capcom has rediscovered the joy of killing players brutally.

**Capcom has rediscovered the joy of killing players brutally**

And it will do it to you again, and again. The original's death animations were amazing and this strives to out-do them all: I've seen Leon lifted into the air on a chainsaw, I've seen a giant bite his head off, cultists poke his eyes out, dogs ripping his throat to shreds, claw-like fingers poked through his brain, huge pulsating worms nom his face, razor-sharp tendrils slice through his tender bits... I could probably fill this

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A remake of one of the best action games ever made

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£50

**DEVELOPER**  
Capcom

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i5-12400F,  
16GB RAM,  
GeForce RTX 2060

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

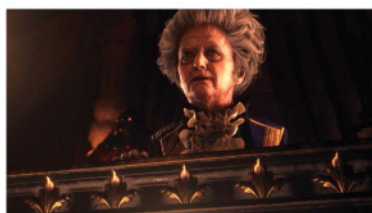
**LINK**  
[residentevil.com](http://residentevil.com)

review's wordcount and still miss some of them out.

## UN FORASTERO!

This is *Resident Evil 4* remake's strength. Where the original came up with a new threat above zombies, the more human-seeming ganados and their swarming tactics, the remake doubles down on this, making enemies tougher and more persistent while subtly altering Leon's toolkit to deal with it. This has always been a game about crowd control: keeping things off your back, whittling down a seemingly unbeatable mob to its last member, gritting your teeth and blasting through a sea of bodies and tentacles. The remake throws everything at you and then, while you're gasping on the ground, the kitchen sink sails through the air right at your head.

This can be utterly exhilarating. *Resident Evil 4's* greatest fights are all here, bigger than ever, and feel better than ever to wade through. The core of combat remains location damage, shooting enemies in the legs or head in order to stagger them then following up with melee attacks – a brilliant push-pull



**ABOVE:** Salazar's wretched opulence is brilliantly recreated, though some players may miss his mocking radio calls to Leon.



Running away is not quite the god-tier strategy it once was: these ganados will catch you.





**TOP:** The most impressive thing about the ganados is how consistently they'll flank you: And then the terrifying audio cues kick in.

**ABOVE:** Boss fights such as El Gigante are reimagined wonderfully, though later bosses' love of spitting acid across great distances is frustrating.



dynamic that sees you staying on the edge of mobs until you need to dash in and unleash a roundhouse or suplex. A brilliant new addition is the ability to parry with your knife (though of course not all attacks can be parried), leading to extended sequences of utter chaos where, through some combination of instinct and extreme firepower, Leon somehow walks away from an army with nary a scratch.

One particularly well-done element of this is, if you'll do a mental drum roll, reticule wavering. I know, I know, doesn't seem like much, but the original game incorporated the idea that Leon's aim would always be very slightly wobbly, and the remake takes this and runs with it. Hold out your pistol and, over a few seconds, the reticule will wobble vaguely around the point you're aiming at before settling and tightening up to a smaller area.

The moment-to-moment combat is as good as *Resident Evil* has ever been, and that's saying something: that shout of "Un forastero!" still sends chills down my spine every time. The remake also initially stays relatively true to the original game's outstanding structure and pacing, but once you're out of the village things change, and not for the better.

### BOULDER DASH?

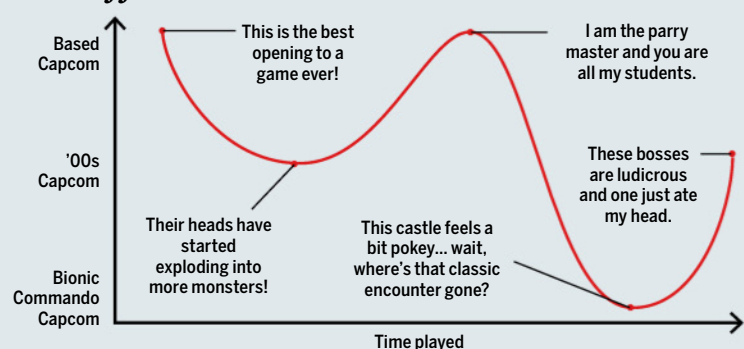
The *Resident Evil 4* remake makes some bold decisions about elements

Ashley, forever the damsel in distress, is now a much more forthright and capable companion.

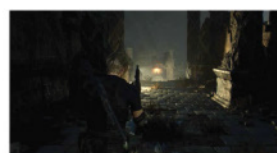


## THE TIMELINE

### Waves of fun







of the original and, in many cases, that decision is simply to remove them. It removes dramatic QTE sequences but doesn't have any ideas about what to replace them with and so moments of great peril – little sequences that I find memorable – just aren't here. If you love the original, you'll notice the absence of one, then another, then by the time you're near the end sadly conclude this isn't going to deliver much of what it should.

**TOP:** As well as the parries, the knife is essential for escaping various grapples and grab attacks.

**ABOVE:** The original's storyline is tweaked considerably, but retains the schlocky charm with a much clearer through-line.

The original *Resident Evil 4* was a slightly crazy game, taking place in an unspecified European deathland of bizarre contraptions, shooting galleries, medieval castles, and an endless menagerie of grotesque and toothy experiments. Part of the joy of it was the amazement at finding such ludicrous environments and setups everywhere. And a lot of these just haven't made the cut and, when they do, it's often in a much-diminished form.

Where the original felt like it was constantly over-reaching, constantly surprising the player with new demands, new environments and wild one-off challenges, this seems content to settle into more of a standard corridor shooter rhythm. The combat is so good that even when the game's unambitious it is borne aloft on a cloud of shotgun shells, but the further you poke into its soft underbelly the more unambitious it begins to seem.

## GETTING ATTACHÉD

*Learning to love your box of tricks*



### 1 CASE

The original's attaché case returns, and serves as an ongoing block-shuffling minigame as you struggle to cram everything in.

### 2 GUNS

What you need is more guns: what you lack is space. Constant crafting keeps things manageable but the merchant will sell you space upgrades.

### 3 ORDER

The real pleasure, of course, is aesthetic. All the guns on one side, ammunition in a corner and healing items bottom right.



Memories are obviously hazy things, but the castle always seemed to me a gigantic playground, filled with back-and-forth warrens and secrets to be uncovered. Here it feels like something designed by Naughty Dog, opulent and gorgeous and fun to walk through, but always with a very obvious big finger pointing out where to go next. I'm not saying the original game was some expansive freeform epic, because it wasn't. It was every bit as linear as this. But it felt a lot bigger.

I suspect that, for those who haven't played *Resident Evil 4*, the experience of this remake will be to discover a very good third-person shooter, and wonder why everyone made such a fuss about it in the first place. Where the original game was pioneering and ended up defining a genre, this remake is trammelled by that legacy and bound by what *Resident Evil 4*'s successors, almost all of which are inferior games, have done to the template.

You'll feel this especially in some of the boss fights and more extreme encounters, where it's almost like Capcom dials back things so everyone can get through it. There's an infamous room in the castle, where Leon and Ashley gradually have to work their way to the back through hordes of enemies, before Leon guards Ashley as she operates a contraption, and the version of it here feels like such a normal

encounter that you wonder, in a game that elsewhere is happy to batter you, why they'd nerf such an infamously tough challenge. It feels like the balance is off.

*Resident Evil 4* remake undoubtedly improves on the original in some ways. Personally I'll always miss the line "Your right hand comes off?" but the B-movie script is much-improved, and the way the storyline has been tweaked, in some cases significantly so, is well-handled and retains enough of the schlock factor that the personalities shine through.

### COVER VERSION

**Anyone who plays this will have a fun time**

Perhaps something like that sanding off on the rough edges is part of the overall problem though, what makes this feel ultimately like just another game. The original may be one of the best games ever made, but it is also

wildly uneven in places, and this remake feels like it removes those spikes and jutting edges. It's happy to batter you, within reason, but overall feels like a much smoother experience. It doesn't have these far-off detours and, with a few notable exceptions, re-does the surprises of the original in new ways without ever quite surprising you enough with how it does so.

If *Resident Evil 4* remake was a standalone title it would be a great game, and anyone who plays this will have a fun time (maybe not on

Hardcore though: it really is brutal). But this is not standalone, it's a remake of Capcom's crown jewel and, ultimately, doesn't shine so bright. Where the original felt expansive, this feels cramped, and where the original went on breathless tangents and threw one idea after another at the player, this feels (in the second half especially) like it settles into a groove it isn't especially interested in breaking free of.

Much of this is forgotten when, in the utter maelstrom of battle, you're surviving by the skin of your teeth and blasting through a sea of limbs and teeth with knife-edge parries and outrageous firepower. But outside of this exquisite action core, *Resident Evil 4* remake feels like a game that runs out of ideas and, most unforgivably, jettisons many parts that made the original so good without having any idea of what to replace them with.

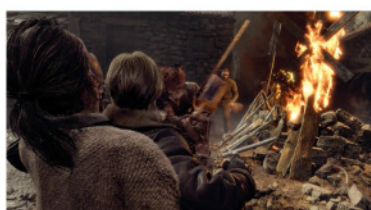
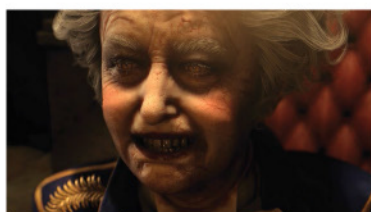
*Resident Evil 4* reinvented third-person action, and ever since it came out I've been waiting for another game to blow the bloody doors off in the way it did. But this is not the heir, so much as a tribute. *Resident Evil 4* remake is a great third-person action game that, sadly, takes too much inspiration from what followed: rather than the daddy what started it all in the first place. ■



**PC GAMER** **VERDICT**

The *Resident Evil 4* remake is a great game in its own right, but unfortunately can't hold a candle to the original.

**80**



**ABOVE:** As well as outright attacks, enemies will grapple Leon and hold him to let others land devastating blows.



The remake features regular challenges, the best of which add souped-up enemies to battle.

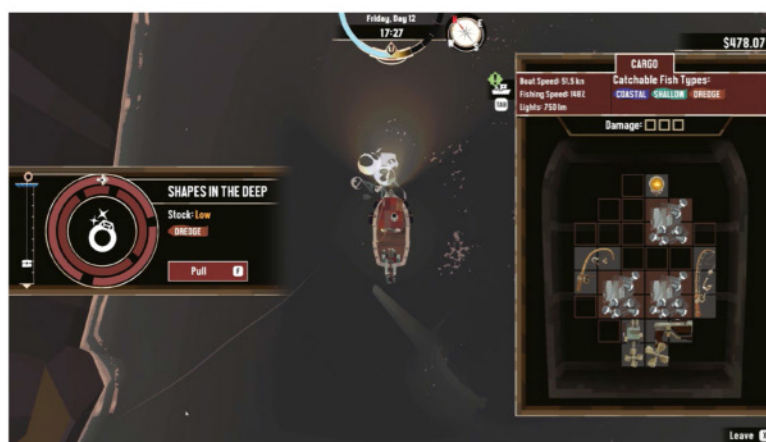
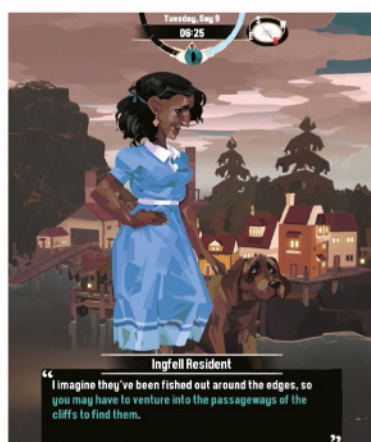




**RIGHT:** Fido looks pretty sus.

**FAR RIGHT:** Time to get dredging.

**BELOW:** *Dredge* has a simple but atmospheric look.





# ALL A-BOAT IT

**DREDGE** is a near-perfect Lovecraftian fishing experience

By Mollie Taylor

**D**redge isn't shy about the horrors that lie mere feet under my fisherman's dinky boat. Sure, my bright day hours are filled with peaceful fishing to gentle piano tracks, in a quaint loop of sailing around for catches and then selling them for money towards upgrades and tools. Then dusk sets, my paranoia kicks in and *Dredge* bears its monstrous, mutated teeth.

Life in *Dredge* is Lovecraftian as hell, wonderfully ominous and effortlessly moreish all at once. Things start off simple enough: my poor fisherman has wrecked his vessel near the small island town of Greater Marrow. After being offered a replacement and a small debt for the pleasure, I'm on my way to start fishing.

Getting a target to align with green zones dotted along various shapes reels fish in. Some have my target spinning around a circle, while others have it swinging between two curved bars. The real challenge comes from what to do once I've landed my catch. Fish come in all shapes and sizes, which I have to fit, *Tetris*-style into my vessel's tiled inventory.

A two-tiled bass is easy, but a pronged hammerhead shark proves challenging. I loved this puzzling element, adding some strategy. These tiles are also shared by designated slots for my equipment and engine. Playing around with maximising my efficiency kept me surprisingly busy.

The real mystery and its dangers begin once my debt is cleared and I approach a strange collector on a nearby island, who sends me to collect relics strewn across four islands. Each has its own quirks—Gale Cliffs features a giant monster that lurks between the rock faces, while Stellar Basin has tentacles that threaten to destroy my vessel unless I find a way to placate them.

Each island gives new fish, new quests and new dangers. I mostly enjoyed the challenges each one offered, but early area, Gale Cliffs, is annoying. There's no clear method

for dealing with the speedy snaking monster that appears every time I encroach on its territory. I had a much better time with other islands, and I worry Gale Cliffs will serve as an early roadblock.

## Anxiety isn't the only horror I have to deal with

### SAIL AWAY

There are a few ways to deal with these problems: handing in a relic to the collector grants you mystical abilities. Early on I'm given Haste, allowing me to speed along the

waters. But these come at a cost. A panic meter rears its ugly head when the sun sets and these mysterious powers are utilised.

The more it increases, the more terrifying things become. I begin to hallucinate red-eyed crows swarming

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
An Eldritch fishing horror full of mystery

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£22

**DEVELOPER**  
Black Salt Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Team17

**REVIEWED ON**  
Ryzen 7 2700X,  
16GB RAM,  
GeForce RTX 3070

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[dredge.game](https://dredge.game)

my boat, and giant monsters emerge from the waters to rip my vessel to shreds. I can offset the panic somewhat by reading skill books and plastering more lights to my boat, but the paranoia arrives eventually.

With some fish only appearing at night I have to take risks. I like this about *Dredge* but it could go further. The day-night cycles are too short and push me in the other direction of playing too safe. I venture out as the sun rises, and within mere minutes I'm already battling the nighttime horrors. Things are made easier through ship upgrades – using money and dredged-up research parts grants me faster engines that speed me up.

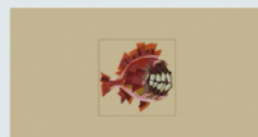
Anxiety isn't the only horror I have to deal with. Every fish has some twisted aberration, like gouged skates with corroded skin and unhinged jaws. The art direction in *Dredge* is gorgeous, and the horrific moments make it extra fascinating to look at. I loved fishing around for these warped forms, keeping me playing long after I'd rolled credits on the game's short-but-sweet story.

*Dredge's* narrative plays out wonderfully. A lot of it is told through NPCs, message bottles and sidequests tucked away across the map. I enjoyed using all of these to put the pieces together, and some time-sensitive sidequests in particular were fantastic. They're not tracked on the map, either, leaving me to rely on my fisherman's instincts to remember their locations.

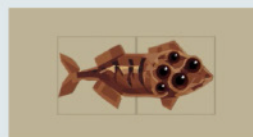
*Dredge* is worth the tidy 15-hour completion time. If you love horror and fun fishing minigames, this is for you. It's not perfect, and the frustrating moments are obvious. But that won't stop me from returning to fill out its twisted encyclopaedia. ■

## PLENTY OF FISH

*These sea critters are ready to mingle*



**GNASHING PERCH**  
"You make me smile from gill to gill."



**MANY-EYED MACKEREL**  
"I only have eyes for you... all five of them."



**VOIDEYE**  
"Are you the void? Because I keep falling into you."



**VORTEX INTERLOPER**  
"You leave my stomach a swirling mass of fluid."

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Dredge* is a fantastically twisted fishing horror full of charm. It snags in parts but still managed to reel me in.

89



# DICING WITH DEATH

**CLASH: ARTIFACTS OF CHAOS** flips God of War upside down

By Jon Bailes

**C**lash: Artifacts of Chaos is like the anti-God of War. It bears a family resemblance to Sony's franchise revival, enough to invite comparison, but its design philosophy could hardly be more different. In particular, if you ever thought God of War would benefit from a more hands-off approach to nudging you through its adventures ("Shut up Atreus and let me figure it out for myself. God!"), then rest assured Clash: Artifacts of Chaos keeps its sweaty palms strictly to itself.

If that sounds heavenly for those who prefer their games not to be littered with symbols and NPC chatter telling them where to go and how to get there, however, beware the old adage 'be careful what you wish for; you might just get it'. Pushing through Clash's lush world and sprinkled narrative is often a richer experience due to the absence of supervisory noise. Yet it swings the pendulum of player guidance so far to the opposite extreme you may find yourself crying out for a quest marker or eager companion to show the way.

## BOY MEETS WORLD

At times, it seems as though Chilean developer ACE Team really is making a point about God of War, not least because protagonist Pseudo almost seems to be a parody of Kratos, like the runt of the litter that the Greek champion emerged from. This nobody hermit is a misshapen

muscle sack, all wonky shoulders and unevenly spread toes, whose bald head sticks out, literally, like a sore thumb. And while he shares Kratos' gruff demeanour, he's really a big softy, who sounds more like George Clooney than a battle-hardened warrior. His diminutive travelling companion, meanwhile, is a sort of spherical owl referred to only as 'the boy'. Make of that what you will.

## Protagonist Pseudo almost seems to be a parody of Kratos

What is for sure is that the visual design of Pseudo and his homeland will only enhance ACE Team's reputation for mind-popping surrealism, previously established in the Zeno Clash series (of which this is a continuation) and The Eternal Cylinder. The evocative oddness here is further enhanced by something Clash does have in common with God of War – a love of vibrant colour. Despite the AA production values, ACE makes its environments and their inhabitants

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A third-person brawling adventure from the makers of Zeno Clash and other oddities

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£25

**DEVELOPER**  
ACE Team

**PUBLISHER**  
Nacon

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i7 10750H,  
16GB RAM,  
GeForce RTX 2070

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[clash-artifacts-of-chaos.com](http://clash-artifacts-of-chaos.com)

sing by transforming them into coloured pencil drawings, decked out in bottomless hues and crosshatched shading. It's a mesmerising effect (aside from an occasionally erratic framerate) that demands you drink in the green on every alien shrub you pass.

There's a level of that colour in the story too, though more low-key. Pseudo meets his companion by chance after the boy's grandfather is killed, and decides to help the little chap find refuge. When it turns out he's wanted by some shady characters, however, the two find themselves on an adventure. It's a journey that takes them all around the land of Zenozoic, into factional territories and the paths of would-be bounty hunters. Much of the time here, might is right, so you have to fight for your interests, but Clash also uses its cast to mull over some fantastically twisted ideologies, including a memorable encounter with a group of fatalist thespians.

## SLICE AND DICE

Whatever their role, the folk and wild animals you meet and battle are extraordinary to behold. Although, in the case of the people that's often because they look like a series of back-fired experiments aimed at merging homo sapiens and beasts. They're chunky, rubbery beings with rough accents and faces that could find a home on Picasso's Guernica. When the first one you meet, a stocky individual with his head squashed down into his torso, slaps his own face to prepare for battle, you know you're in for a show.

These encounters become more meaningful due to a ritual you can opt into before the fight kicks off. The 'one law' of the land is that any combat challenge must be accepted, with the two sides first playing a game of dice and the loser performing a forfeit of the winner's choice. Maybe they have to drink a slow poison, for example, or are

## STRIKE A POSE Find and unlock a range of fighting styles



### BOXING

Put up your dukes and unleash your jab combo.



### CRAB

Punch and grab with one hand behind your back.



### MAMMOTH

Clasp your fists together and come out swinging.



### SPEAR

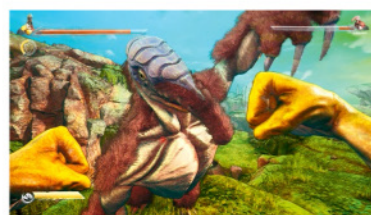
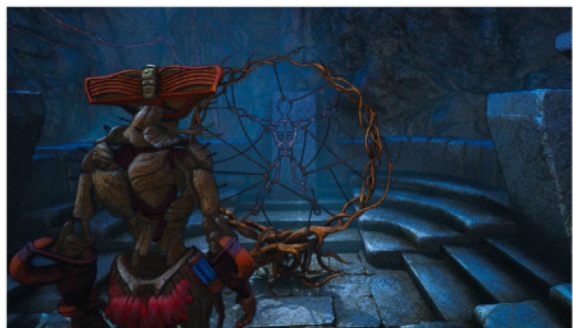
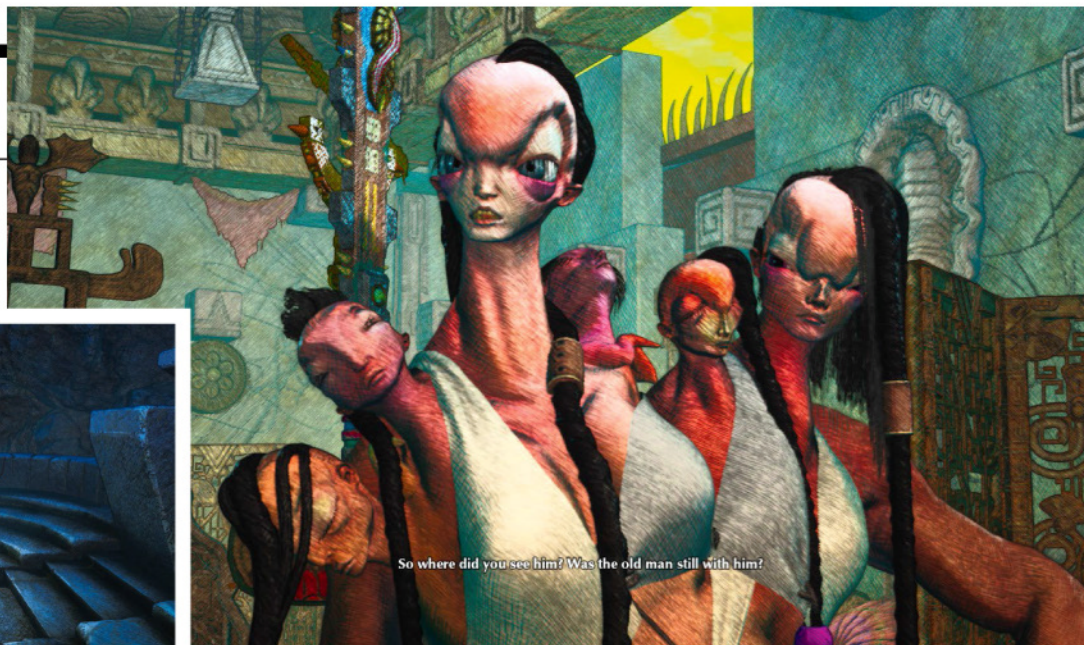
Lunge your body forward to strike from range.



### SLASH

Wide swipes can catch multiple opponents at once.





**FAR LEFT:** Once the dice are rolled, use counters to strategically alter the result.

**LEFT:** The bigger they are, the harder they fall.





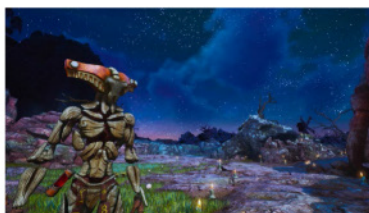


Greetings, travellers! Have you come to join the Eastern Zoroastrian Travelling Players?



**TOP RIGHT:** The landscape has plenty of intriguing sights to look out for.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Look out for rising smoke to find new campsites.



If you have business, go inside. If you don't, go away. Either way, I don't care.



☞ tethered to a peg with a rope, limiting their movement. Sometimes the results can be trivial but in others they can tip the balance in battle, and the ritual itself is a tactical affair.

This is a sign that *Clash* wants you to think strategically before steaming in. The game's first fights are like drunken bar brawls, as you and a rival exchange blows with fat fists until one of you drops, or hilarity ensues as multiple opponents line up and accidentally slap each other. But as the game makes clear,

most enemies are stronger than you, while you're faster, so you soon have to play like a boxer punching above their weight, jabbing and retreating, or sidestepping swings to squeeze in a quick combo. In doing so, you build up a power meter which you can trigger when full to enter first-person mode (a call back to *Zeno Clash*), causing quick damage before executing a finishing move. Alternatively, you can wade in with weapons – mostly crude hammers and clubs – but they break after a while, and are often best saved for the toughest customers.

Despite the measured approach to hitting people *Clash* encourages, however, actually executing your plan is far less satisfying. Because you're weaker than your opponents, small mistakes can be very costly, and because enemies are unpredictable it's highly risky to get in close and rely on dodging or the spongy parry mechanic. You also can't be certain when your attacks will interrupt theirs, so committing to a full combo is dangerous. Especially when outnumbered, your best bet is to circle at a distance, attacking with your projectile throw ability (an essential find) and baiting foes into hitting each other. The moment you try to land a strike, you risk getting blitzed.

The one small mercy here is that when Pseudo dies, he reawakens at night in a body made of wood and nails and red woolly stuff, and this form presents you with a second chance against those who bested you. If you can beat them, you can revive Pseudo's flesh form and carry on your merry way. Fail on this second attempt, though, and it's back to your last save point. It takes the edge off the frustration knowing you've got

this backup shot, even if less punishing systems or flexible difficulty settings would have been much more preferable.

### GET LOST

As for why Pseudo has a nocturnal timber alter-ego... well, one of *Clash*'s endearing qualities is that it doesn't feel the need to explain. It's a mysterious feature of a strange world that maybe gets clarified and maybe doesn't, but either way adds to the

sense that there's more going on under the surface. That's also a reason that Zenozoic is intriguing to venture into, even more so because you often get to navigate quietly, considering the lie of the land, contemplating

what it all means. The boy breaks the silence occasionally, but doesn't feel the need to fill every second with chat. It's enough that the views are stunning, fading to pastel hues over long distances, and some of the music is hauntingly spiritual, a little like that in *Nier: Automata*.

Unfortunately, this apparently open world is too knotted for its own good. At first, it feels suffocating – a maze of dense paths carved into shin-high obstacles that signal invisible walls – only to spread out later in bewildering fashion, with no

visual logic to prioritise one direction over another. Side paths lead to treasure, but also further side paths, branching off each other until you barely recall where you started, while main thoroughfares may be half-concealed, demanding repeated sweeps of an area to uncover. Locations lack the same intuitive connectivity as in something like *Dark Souls*, or the instantly distinctive geography, or unique shortcuts that help you mentally link the place together. You can spend a lot of time feeling lost in *Clash*, or erroneously looping back to where you've already been. I've stored pre-emptive sympathy for anyone who takes a break from playing it halfway through then tries to return.

Even the map is utterly hopeless – a small square on an inventory screen that takes six button presses to view. Pseudo appears on it as a tiny circle rather than an arrow, surrounded by nothing more than a handful of place names and vaguely sketched landmarks. That could work if the landscape consistently enabled you to see your destination in the distance, but it doesn't. Fairly early in the game, for instance, you're advised to head to 'the town', and there's nothing that looks like a town visible on the horizon. Nor does it help much when you do get your bearings, because the route is unlikely to be a straight line.

*Clash* is almost offensively obtuse next to games like *God of War*, then, while its challenge level oscillates between a breeze and a gale. It also fails to either drip feed small rewards or produce a sense of achievement when you come through tough spots, since success often comes from attritional stubbornness. Yet there's something to be said for *Clash*'s refusal to explain its ideas, places and oddball creatures the way *God of War* would. It's more efficient in its worldbuilding, characterisation and plotting, and thus more generously open to interpretation. Pseudo may be Kratos' smaller, weaker (and poorer) sibling, but at least he's got a deeper and more interesting soul. ■

## WEAPON OF CHOICE

Select a forfeit then win the dice ritual



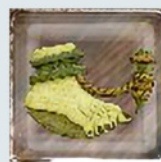
### FOG

The arena is covered in a mist that covers the loser's view.



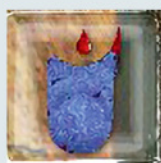
### LURE

A wild flying beast appears and takes the winner's side.



### TETHER

The loser's foot is tied to the ground with a rope.



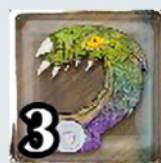
### PACT

The winner can summon the loser to help in a fight.



### FIRST STRIKE

The winner gets a free hit before the fight begins.



### SNAKE VENOM

A poison that causes cramps to the loser during battle.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Clash: Artifacts of Chaos*'s brilliantly surreal world is hampered by uncompromising combat and level design.

64



# HEART AND SOUL

Explore a beautiful tropical island using magic powers in **TCHIA**

By Christopher Livingston

**I** love *Tchia*. I completed the main story quest in 12 hours, but I've played for twice as long just to explore more, complete challenges, collect cosmetics, find secrets and take photos. At least four of those hours were spent just following a long series of treasure maps filled with hand-drawn landmarks and other clues, testing my detective skills and knowledge of the world to uncover them all. And I'm not done playing yet, not by a long shot.

*Tchia* is a third-person open world adventure where you play as a little kid (named Tchia) living on an archipelago based on the real-world South Pacific island of New Caledonia. While beautiful and tropical, Tchia's island is no paradise. An evil overlord named Meavora has filled the island with creepy, golem-like foot soldiers made of fabric, and a vicious henchman has abducted Tchia's father. Tchia sets out to free her dad with the help of her newly-discovered power to 'soul-jump' into animals and inanimate objects and possess them.

For as long as her soul meter is filled, Tchia can control the things she possesses, creatures like birds and dolphins and crabs and objects like oil drums, rocks, and coconuts. When I need to cross the island quickly, I target a bird, soul-jump into it, and then I am the bird. I flap my wings and glide through the air over the continent. When I've arrived at my destination (or my soul meter runs out), I pop out of the bird and I'm Tchia again.

The more I do it the more fun it becomes. I can chain my soul-jumps, going from racing through the offshore waves toward the beach as a dolphin, then ejecting myself from the water and possessing a passing seagull to take flight before my feet hit the sand. The animals I soul-jump into often have special abilities: deer can thunder across the island faster than any human, dogs can dig things up, and cows can poop out explosive turds, good for blowing things up like

the entrances to caves and those creepy, clothed enemies.

## ACROBAT

Tchia is a kinetic and capable traveller even when she's not using magic. She can climb almost anything, from sheer cliff walls to the sides of office buildings to vertical metal pipelines, as long as her stamina holds out. Clamber to the top of a tree, rock it back and forth, and she can use it as a catapult to launch through the air. She has a glider, useful for leaping off cliffs and then popping her chute to serenely drift the last few feet to

## She can buttslide down mountainsides at terrific speeds

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A third-person open world action adventure set on a tropical archipelago

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£25

**DEVELOPER**  
Awaceb

**PUBLISHER**  
Kepler Interactive

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i7-9700K, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2080

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[awaceb.com/tchia](http://awaceb.com/tchia)

safety, and she can buttslide down mountainsides at terrific speeds. The island quickly becomes a playground for acrobatic travel, and combining all of Tchia's traversal options and soul powers is the most fun I've had exploring an open world for ages.

She has a ukulele, too, that doubles as a wand to strum the magic spells I've acquired, such as conjuring animals, changing the time of day, and even making it rain or stop raining. Plus I can use it to play (poorly, in my case) freeform music, and participate in many musical numbers across the islands, sometimes a quiet, sweet song sung at a campfire by a friend, sometimes a boisterous celebration at a village party after a communal feast.

Over the course of my adventure I grew incredibly fond of *Tchia*. Her coming of age story has some relatable awkward moments, plenty of funny encounters (trying and failing to invent a cool secret handshake with a new friend had me laughing throughout), genuinely tragic events, and even a bit of wholesome childhood romance. The island itself is beautifully brought to life by the developer, Awaceb, which is from New Caledonia, and the voice acting and music – the game is entirely in the languages of French and Drehu – are performed by New Caledonian locals.

*Tchia* (the game) is an absolute delight, an enchanting world that is filled to the brim with adventure, excitement, beauty, physics-driven fun and lots of charming characters, none moreso than Tchia (the kid) herself. She may throw her soul haphazardly into crabs, birds, fish and coconuts, but her heart always stays right where it is. ■

## GO CAMPING

Here's what you can do at the campsite

- 1 Change your hat, glasses and clothes for a new look.
- 2 Play freeform music on your handy instrument.
- 3 Pick a new skin for your backpack and glider.



- 4 Take a nap to fast-forward the clock.
- 5 Have a quick meal to recharge your soul meter.
- 6 Pinpoint your location on the world map.

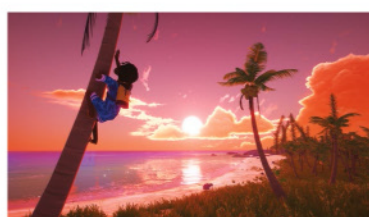
PC GAMER

VERDICT

*Tchia* from developer Awaceb has to be one of the best open-world games to come along in quite some time.

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**ABOVE:** Share a song with some new friends.

**FAR LEFT:** Set sail to discover new islands.



There are plenty of animal friends to meet.



# TRENCH FOOT

**THE GREAT WAR: WESTERN FRONT** captures the brutality of the First World War

By Luke Winkie

**T**he Great War: Western Front is not a real-time strategy game for perfectionists. World War I was infamously attritional, claiming the lives of 40 million civilians and military personnel. So, when you sound the whistle and send your boys over the top, dozens of them will be gunned down in the hellish muck of no man's land, with machine gun emplacements able to casually eradicate whole companies in a matter of seconds.

That makes this game something of an outlier compared to its more bloodless peers. *Company of Heroes* veterans relish the sweatless gratification of an expert counterflank, and there are few joys comparable to a Mutalisk rout in *StarCraft*. But in *The Great War*, every victory comes with a brutal death toll. The terrors of 1914 shine white and hot, and, quite frankly, they might make you hesitant to stick around for long.

As the name implies, *The Great War: Western Front* takes place entirely within the fortifications that sliced through Belgium and France in the 1910s. Players are greeted by a grand, tabletop-ish tactics board in the campaign, where they marshal the regiments of either the Allied or Central Powers along the frontlines.

Those interstitial moments are spent assigning research points, bolstering munitions, and breaking ground on new installations that make the terrors of mechanised

warfare slightly more palatable – a medical facility, a makeshift pub, and so on.

**Any successful engagement requires a sturdy line of heavy artillery**

## WAR MACHINE

But commanders can only beat around the bush for so long.

Eventually it is time to

act and spill your troops into enemy territory for marginal gains and gristly carnage. This is where *Western Front* morphs into a sorrowful, *Total War*-esque dirge in battlefields pockmarked with dug-out trenches and makeshift chokepoints, all the better to pick off the rival troops. Any successful engagement requires a sturdy line of heavy artillery, which can suppress advancements and

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A slow-paced, real-time strategy game set in the horrific fires of World War I

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£30

**DEVELOPER**  
Petroglyph Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Frontier Foundry

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i7-9700,  
16GB RAM,  
RTX 2070 Super

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Yes

**LINK**  
[playthegreatwar.com](http://playthegreatwar.com)

shatter morale. But most importantly, you need to muster the full war machine of Europe; a phalanx of flesh and bone. *Western Front* does not deal in squads or special operations. Instead, a tide of humanity smashes against the opposing earthworks until they finally capitulate.

All of this viscera leaves a hell of an impression. Compared to games that have evoked the spirit of 1914, (*Battlefield 1*, *Isonzo*, *Beyond The Wire*,) *Western Front* takes an active role in dispiriting all of us armchair generals with a wealth of gnarly decisions. Victory in *The Great War* is achieved by capturing and holding a series of control points, and the simplest way to ascertain that condition is by laying down a blast of mortar shells to briefly paralyse the gunner nests before sending a few waves of men hurtling through wide-open, cover-bereft mud and snow. Dozens of them will be annihilated before they make it to their objective, and those that do will need to clear the enemy headquarters – sandbag by sandbag – before finally wresting authority of the arena. As a strategist, it's often hard to know if I'm doing a good job in *Western Front*. Yes, a few acres of land now fly under the Allied flag, but the veritable mountain of writhing bodies behind me certainly looks like a loss.

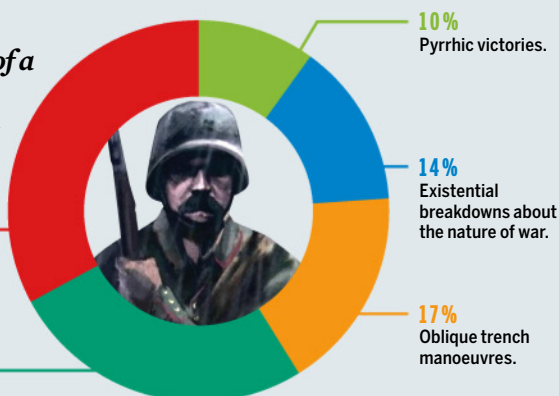
As you progress through *Western Front*'s tech tree, more combat wrinkles become available, mildly augmenting the action on the field. You can leverage the rudimentary air force of the era, dispatching AI-controlled bombing runs and intercepting forces to conquer the grey skies above. More advanced artillery barrages lay on the horizon as you delve deeper into the war; I'm particularly fond of a punishing, rolling bombardment that slowly encroaches upon enemy positions, while leaving a long trail of smoke behind that covers your own advancements. The armoured

## DAY JOB

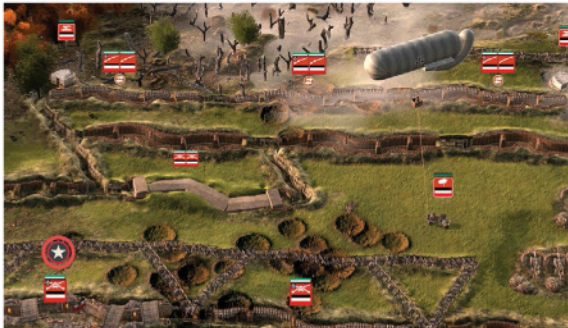
Components of a  
*The Great War: Western Front* battle

**33%**  
Battalion-shredding machine gun fire.

**26%**  
Bone-shattering mortar shots.





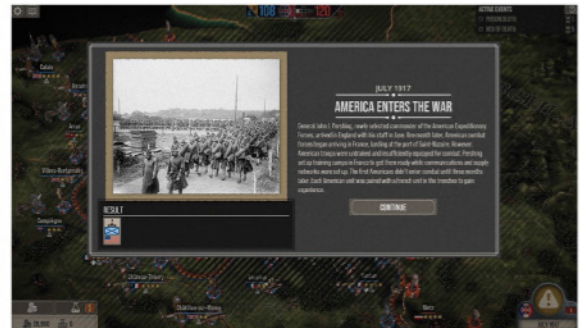


**FAR LEFT:** Sizing up the enemy.

**BELOW:** The futility.



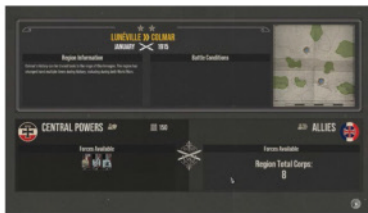




**RIGHT:** Shell scars.

**FAR RIGHT:** Hunkering down in the trenches.

**BELOW:** Marshalling your forces on the strategic map.





divisions are also quite powerful, if only because a tank can effectively puncture the best-laid reinforcements.

### DEATH MARCH

Despite all of those fun ingredients, *Western Front* is surprisingly rote in its delivery method. The shells fire, the battalions charge, and you hope to not be outmanoeuvred or outflanked by your adversary. In fact, I'd say that the majority of the game's decisions come down to a matter of pure timing. If the bombs explode at the wrong moment, and the enemy lines aren't suppressed as your troops come into view, you can reasonably expect to be wiped out. Few strategy games are more eager to punish your blunders.

This would be less of an issue if *Western Front* had a touch more fidelity in its controls. Soldiers move at a turgid, Napoleonic pace, and despite the relative straightforwardness of my objectives, they'd often get bogged down in some strange patches of mouse-click vagueness. If, for instance, a conquered trench already contains the two maximum battalions it can hold, my other companies would occasionally dawdle outside of that safe haven, ready to be smited off the earth by a gunpowder payload. Yes, you can blame that on my own inefficiencies as a manager – I should have probably been quicker to direct them to another trench – but with how many units are on screen, and

how they're constantly intermingling in the same real estate by the nature of World War I's tight quarters, it becomes difficult to snag the individual corps that need direction.

But there are also other instances where the command chain breaks down for reasons totally out of my purview. These convoluted, snake-

like trenches can grow confusing for both me and the software. I have asked my forces to attack a group of soldiers on the other end of a network, only to watch the two run past each other like ships passing in the

night. For all of *Western Front*'s commitment to historical flavour, the sheer scale of the warfare can summon some classic, videogame jank from the source code.

The aesthetic trappings of *Western Front* aren't steeped in any overarching cinematic narrative. You choose what year you want the campaign to begin – and what side to commandeer – which will obviously determine when certain inevitabilities on the timeline, like when the Americans join the fray, pop up. But do not expect any treacly cutscenes or character moments. After finishing a turn, you may be confronted with some sort of interjecting archival event – a recruitment shortage, a morale swoon, and so on – but these are confined to a headline and a few numerical modifiers colouring the action. For the most part, you'll be staring at the borderlands and squabbling over the same few

meters of territory over and over again. The actual western front hardly moved during the war. History repeats itself.

### TRENCH WARFARE

I think that's the main issue eating at *The Great War*. For all of its pomp and circumstance – the limbs ricocheting by mortar shot, the macro-to-micro scheming, the gratuitous mournfulness of the subject matter – there isn't a tremendous amount to do here. Other games have made the case that World War I is more flavourful, and maybe more palatable, than its archival record; consider the triumvirate of *Isonzo*, *Verdun* and *Tannenberg* which eagerly showcase the magnificent, if death-besotted, vistas of the conflict; how this powder keg truly consumed the whole European continent. *Western Front*, on the other hand, is far more conservative with its storytelling liberties. This is trench warfare at its bleakest and most uncompromising, which is to say that it captures World War I at its most soul-breaking. Victory, or even a few control points, can only be obtained by way of massive human sacrifice. I don't think anyone is supposed to walk away from their PCs feeling particularly proud of what they've wrought after a session.

In that sense, *The Great War: Western Front* is a fabulous teaching tool. It demonstrates a wide variety of turn-of-the-century innovations, and how they all effortlessly reduced the warfighters of Europe into a fine, beige-pink pulp. But when I consider the wealth of options to scratch my strategist itch, I find myself more drawn to the cloak-and-dagger intrigue of *Crusader Kings*, or the multifaceted clashes of *Age of Empires*. Those games ask so many interesting questions, and can be provoked with countless unconventional solutions. With *Western Front*, however, only one answer is acceptable: a vicious, heartless forward march. That, my friends, is World War I. Get out while you still can. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

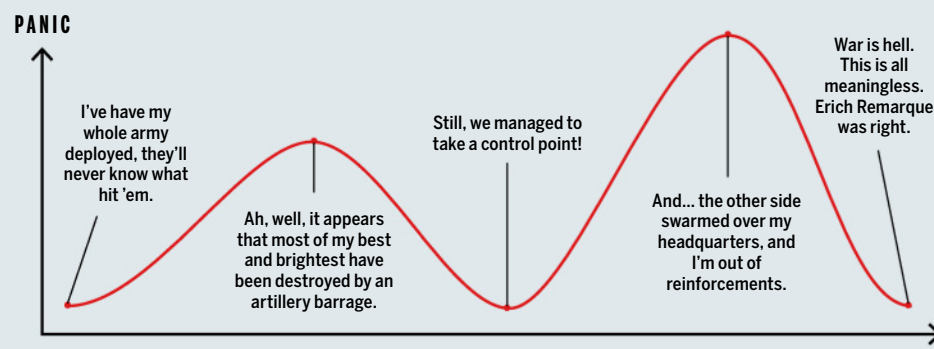
The Great War: Western Front is a bleak but conservative attempt to capture the brutal battles of World War I.

68

## The sheer scale of the warfare can summon some classic, videogame jank

### CANNON FODDER

The timeline of your average skirmish on the western front





# CLOUDED

After the highs of *The Witch Queen*, **DESTINY 2: LIGHTFALL** doesn't stick the landing

By Phil Savage

**A**fter a year of power creep letting us chew through enemies, *Lightfall* is here to bring some challenge back to *Destiny 2*. Abilities take longer to recharge, enemies hit harder and tank more damage, and it's no longer possible to outlevel certain activities. We've spent a year gorging on ice cream, and now *Destiny 2*'s newest expansion wants to remind us that, no, we also have to eat our broccoli. In this analogy, the broccoli is machine guns.

This was always going to be a hard sell. *Destiny 2* feels different now – less approachable and quicker to punish a mistake. While many of its changes were necessary, I'm not surprised that players aren't as hyped about what *Lightfall* brings.

It doesn't help that there isn't even a great campaign to distract from the disempowerment fantasy. After *The Witch Queen* showed Bungie at its best, in *Lightfall* what we get is a mess. The story is an infuriating speedrun through vague ideas, none given the time and space they need to develop. What is the Radial Mast? What will happen if Calus connects it to the Veil? What is the Veil? Throughout, *Lightfall* does a terrible job of setting the stakes of our missions, making them feel inconsequential. Outside of the first and last cutscene, everything here feels like a disposable sidequest.

We rush through plot beats and character arcs. Instead of doing the work to show Osiris reckoning with his grief over the loss of his Ghost, his character shifts wildly, bafflingly in tone from one mission to the next. Instead of fleshing out the genuinely tense and compelling cutscenes between Calus and the Witness, we're left to reverse engineer the Witness' likely plan of using the former emperor as a disposable lure for the Guardian. Instead of getting to know Neomuna as a living, functioning civilisation, we discover that its citizens are hiding from the invasion inside Neptune's version of the metaverse,

leaving the city feeling deserted – just another barren destination biome, this time with neon.

## Another barren destination biome, this time with neon

We've been here before. Both *Shadowkeep* and *Beyond Light* gestured at good story beats, but struggled to make them work within the confines of *Destiny 2*'s story delivery mechanisms. But *The*

*Witch Queen* felt like the studio had turned a corner – it was a satisfying story, well suited to the game it was a part of. This is a step backwards.

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
The fifth *Destiny 2* expansion. This one is very purple

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£40

**DEVELOPER**  
Bungie

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Ryzen 7 3700X,  
32GB RAM,  
GeForce RTX 3080Ti

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Co-op and PvP

**LINK**  
bungie.net

## STRAND AND DELIVER

Still, the encounter design throughout the campaign's missions is mostly strong – at least in the missions that give you enough freedom to choose your own approach. Throughout there's a good mix of arena size and enemy density, making missions feel varied and satisfying to overcome. Unfortunately, a handful of campaign missions are dragged down by how Strand, *Lightfall*'s new subclass, is incorporated into them. Having so much time dedicated to what is effectively a tutorial for your new powerset feels like a waste. I would have preferred the tutorial to remain just that – something handled separately from the campaign itself, giving the missions more space to actually tell the story.

It's made worse on legendary difficulty, which is how I played. In *The Witch Queen*, it felt like the harder version of the campaign was designed to reward my hours with the game up until now – the guns that I'd earned, the build knowledge that I'd accumulated. The same is mostly true of *Lightfall*, at least until Strand appears. In the missions that pull double duty as a tutorial, you're forced to use a pared down, skeletal version of the subclass, before finally unlocking the full thing on completion of the campaign.

Had we been given the fully formed subclass sooner, I would have absolutely taken it into campaign missions. Armed with the full suite of fragments and other buildcrafting options, I've been getting a lot of enjoyment out of Strand as a middle ground between the crowd control offered by Stasis and the more offensively focused Light subclasses.

On Warlock – the only character I've completed the campaign on so far – I've dropped the grapple grenade in favour of two primary builds. One uses Necrotic Grips to juice up the unravel damage effect with free poison tick damage, while

## TAKING A STRAND

Here's what the new subclass can do

### DEBUFFS



#### SUSPEND

A great tool for dealing with large crowds. Suspended enemies can't move or shoot, giving you time to deal with them at your leisure.



#### UNRAVEL

When unravelled enemies get hurt, they take additional damage and spread the effect to other foes. Pairs great with damage-over-time weapons.



#### SEVER

Any severed enemies do significantly reduced damage to you and your allies. Useful, sure, but it's a bit dull really.

### BUFFS



#### WOVEN MAIL

Take reduced damage. Very strong, especially with the wider nerfs to the resilience stat's damage reduction.



#### THREADING

Creatures that seek out enemies and attack them, exploding on impact. Fun, but really, really dumb. Get confused by walls.

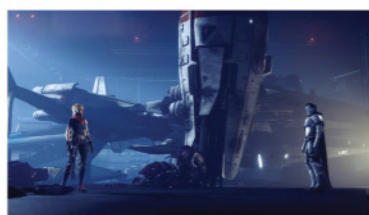


#### TANGLE

Kill a Strand debuffed enemy and it will turn into a Tangle. Like the old Warminde Cells, these will explode when you shoot at them.

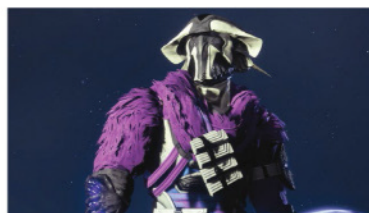


Caitl appears all too briefly, but is great each time.



**FAR LEFT:** Neomuna is pretty enough, but completely barren.

**LEFT:** Season of Defiance brings the drama missing from the main campaign.



Is your screen a mess of green effects? That means Strand is happening.

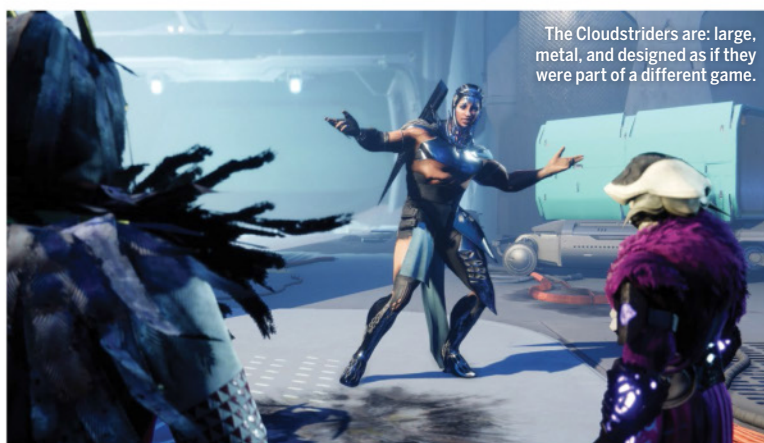
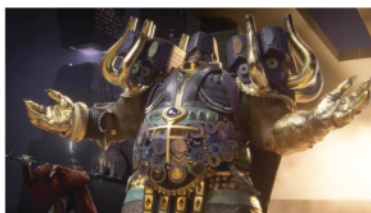




**ABOVE:** Honestly the training montage might be the best part of the campaign.

**RIGHT:** The grapple is... fine? I'm not using it on any of my builds though.

**BELOW:** Go forth, my minions.



The Cloudstriders are large, metal, and designed as if they were part of a different game.





the other goes all in on Threadlings – the flowing green minions that seek out and jump on enemies. They're often wildly inconsistent, but I can't help but cackle whenever I consume a grenade and cast a rift to send eight of them scurrying towards enemies.

Things do pick up in the post-campaign. The missions that unlock after go some way to rectifying some of the big mistakes with the campaign's story. Characters finally bother to ask the question of what the Veil even is – not that we get an answer – and we even get to speak to some members of the virtual citizenry of the city. It's limited – characterisation in radio play form – but it's something at least.

I'm also happy with the ritual activities that populate Neomuna, particularly Terminal Override – an open world event that rotates its reward and location each day. It works a lot like last year's Nightmare Containment seasonal event, a drop-in-drop-out fight across the map, ending in a boss fight. I've jumped in a lot over the last two weeks as I search for a specific Hatchling roll on the new Strand machine gun, and it's just low-stakes and breezy enough that, unlike *The Witch Queen's* Wellspring, it never feels like a chore to dip into.

The seasonal side of *Lightfall* has been good too. Defiance instantly nails the tone of the Shadow Legion's invasion of Earth, and its main characters pair well together. It's also, arguably, the most successful part of the game in terms of the new difficulty. Defiance's new Battlegrounds lock players to five points under the recommended power level, which feels like a sweet spot for a farmable activity. It's not so easy that it's boring – you can easily die from a dumb mistake – but not so challenging that you're punished for experimenting with fun loadouts.

## RISE AND GRIND

Elsewhere, the new difficulty is inconsistent. Fundamentally, I agree with the basic problem that Bungie is trying to fix. *Destiny 2* was too easy, at least for the majority of its activities. Last year's Light 3.0 reworks completely solved add clear through near constant ability uptime

in a way that hurt the sandbox – invalidating roaming supers and the very concept of machine guns. But in *Lightfall*, the weapon sandbox just hasn't shifted enough to compensate for the extra challenge.

Primary weapons have been hit hardest – enemies now have more health, and, in those activities

featuring an enforced power cap, our weapons aren't doing as much damage in response. Hand cannons and pulse rifles have been underperforming for a while already, and now they feel worse than

ever. And now other weapon types feel underpowered too. Unless you're equipping an SMG or bow, or using an exotic primary to benefit from the intrinsic 40% extra damage against minor enemies, you're better off not using your primary at all. We've instead swung hard in the opposite direction, where many of my loadouts use double special weapons, with a machine gun in the heavy slot.

My other gripe is with the handling of power level this release. The idea of locking players below the recommended level of higher-difficulty activities isn't necessarily a bad one, but here Bungie has opted for the worst way to expand on the experiments they started last year. If power level was going to be locked for all legend and master difficulty

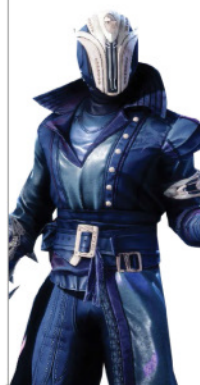
activities, it should have been alongside the removal of the power grind altogether. Instead, we get the worst of both worlds: a standard expansion gear grind, with the added wrinkle of your power level not meaning much when you do finally reach the top. Previously the effect of the grind – my least favourite part of any *Destiny* release – was that you were able to outlevel more difficult activities, giving you the feeling of at least being more capable for the effort you put in.

Now, instead, I'm grinding in order to still be underpowered for the end game. This, at a psychological level, just feels bad. The power grind was already a chore, and now it's an entirely meaningless one too.

Bungie has said that we can expect more experiments with difficulty and power level throughout the next year, but, as with the potential primary weapon changes, that doesn't really help the experience of the live game right now. Perhaps most importantly, the overall reward structure needs significant work to actually match the effort that players are now putting in.

None of *Lightfall's* features or sandbox changes are inherently unsalvageable, and a bunch of mishandled story beats in an uneven campaign doesn't mean *Destiny 2* is bad now. The core enjoyment is still there, even around the missteps. And *Lightfall* isn't even *Destiny 2's* worst expansion – it's better than *Shadowkeep* by some distance. And yet, despite that, I'm scoring it lower, because *Lightfall* also follows on from what was arguably *Destiny 2's* best expansion in *The Witch Queen*.

Where that release progressed the game in some meaningful ways and delivered some crucial momentum towards the end of its narrative arc, *Lightfall* stumbles. It's a backwards step, both in the campaign and in the half-formed approach to implementing a new standard of difficulty. I'm hopeful that the systemic changes will, when fully fleshed out, leave the game in a better position than before. But, for now, this is the game that we have. ■



## Characters finally bother to ask the question of what the Veil is

## LOAD BEARING

Loadouts can be saved in-game now. Here's what they remember

**GUNS AND ARMOUR**  
The system will apply your chosen weapons and armour, even if they're in your vault. But not if they're on another character. That's stealing.

**MODS**  
Your mod configuration is also saved, which is a big timesaver when transitioning between builds. The switch is near-instant, too.

**SUBCLASS**  
Ability, aspect and fragment choices are saved, so you don't have to remember the difference between Ember of Singeing and Ember of Searing.

**ORNAMENTS**  
Transmog and shaders are saved, so you've really got no excuse for having an ugly fit.

**VEHICLES**  
Loadouts won't save sparrows, ships or Ghosts. But I'm always using A Thousand Wings anyway, so I don't really care that much.

**ARTIFACT**  
Perk choices on the Seasonal Artifact also can't be saved, unfortunately. Having to reset it to make adjustments is a big time waster.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

A disappointing campaign, but feels like it's still some patches away from leaving the game in a good place.

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# A NOVEL IDEA

**STORYTELLER** is a short but sweet puzzle game about building tall tales

By Jon Bailes

**F**or as long as there have been written stories, people have been trying to theorise what makes them tick. Some interpret stories as a series of acts, for example, while others view them as different varieties of a hero's journey, or riffs on seven basic plots. *Storyteller*, meanwhile, posits that it's fun to muck about with time-honoured structures and tropes, and see what sticks. And frankly, it's hard to disagree.

In *Storyteller's* comic-strip world, any tale can be told in three to six panels, and it's your job to figure out how. Each canvas of panels is a puzzle, which you solve by placing scenes and characters to create an outcome that matches the story's title. Perhaps the title is 'Eve dies heartbroken', for example, and you're handed two scene types to play with, a wedding and a graveyard, along with two characters, Adam and Eve. Drop Adam and Eve into the wedding scene, and they fall in love. Place the graveyard on the next panel and Adam on the tombstone, and he's dead. Place Eve next to the grave and, yep, she's heartbroken. Now all that's left is for Eve to kick the bucket.

From that basic beginning, the stories become more convoluted, cunning and farcical. What if you place a third character in a wedding scene with someone who's already hitched, for instance? Well, the married party will reject their new suitor, leaving them either heartbroken or scorned. At least that is until later puzzles introduce an 'affair' scene, in which case you can turn said spouse into a love cheat.

Love, betrayal and jealousy fuel many of *Storyteller's* tales, as it takes you on a whistle-stop tour of fiction, from fairy tales to detective stories, Shakespearean tragedy to gothic horror. Yet it also plays with traditional expectations, with pleasingly flexible, and comically silly results, like the courtly romance entitled 'Everyone rejects Edgar', where the hapless hero desperately

tries his luck with anyone he can find. This willingness to indulge the extremes of established setups equally revels in blending classics like Austen with soapy trash, for example in a tale where Edgar dies leaving his wife Lenora behind, only to come back to life and find she's wedded another suitor.

The joy of *Storyteller* is not merely in its solutions, however, but the process itself, thanks to a consistent logic where intentions and effects are clear. Indeed, because of that logic, sometimes the most fun you can have

here is to indulge in trial and error – the beauty of *Storyteller's* system is that simply swapping the order of scenes or exchanging one character for another may have unforeseen effects, like a version of the frog princess story which ends in two frogs snogging. These moments land thanks to a simple drag-and-drop interface and context-appropriate animations that trigger the moment you pop a character into a scene.

## JACKANORY

So enjoyable are *Storyteller's* building blocks to play with, in fact, that you may find yourself wolfing it down in one sitting, since solving all 51 puzzles only takes around two hours. And while there's nothing wrong as such with a game that offers up a charming 120 minutes before calling it quits, it is hard not to feel a little underwhelmed when the credits roll. In part that's because some concepts are left under-explored, like the monsters chapter that introduces vampire and werewolf characters, then shuffles them offstage after a couple of stories. But more than mere quantity, the issue is that *Storyteller* doesn't really build to anything climactic or profound. It just stops.

Its creative systems do offer up a few interesting ideas to chew on, such as what makes a story work, or how stories can subvert cast-iron rules. But those themes emerge in the first ten minutes, and don't kick on as you advance. In contrast, other brief puzzle games like *Gorogoa* don't feel cut short because they arc towards a conclusion. For all the core genius of this game about telling stories, then, and the precise execution, the one thing *Storyteller* is missing is a story to tell of its own. ■

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
The final form of a 2008 browser game about telling stories to solve puzzles

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£12.50

**DEVELOPER**  
Daniel Benmergui

**PUBLISHER**  
Annapurna

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i7 10750H,  
16GB RAM,  
GeForce RTX 2070

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
annapurna  
interactive.com

## Love, betrayal and jealousy fuel many of *Storyteller's* tales

## SCHEME TEAM

*These characters and their nefarious plots*



**THE BARON**  
Not content with his current title, the baron has eyes on the throne, via marriage or murder.



**WITCH**  
Looking to transform herself from an old hag to a youthful beauty, and turn rivals into frogs.



**ISOBEL**  
A fine lady who merely seeks a suitable match. Just don't expect her to take rejection well.



**BUTLER**  
The butler may seem to be a faithful servant, but harbours resentment towards his employer.



**HATEY**  
One of a crew of bearded dwarfs. As his name suggests, Hatey is especially ill-tempered.



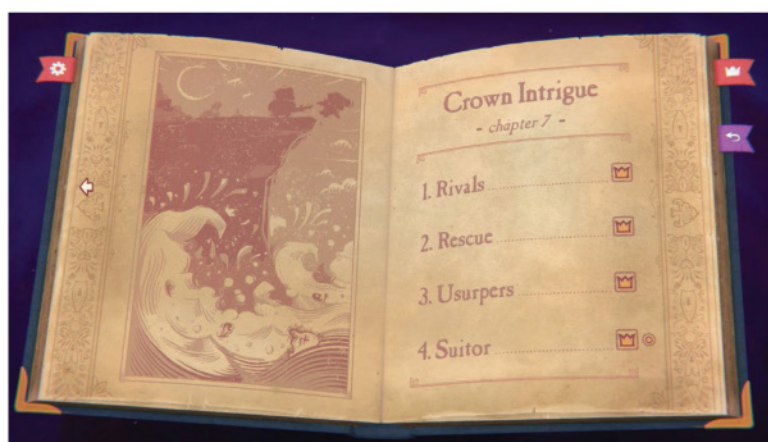
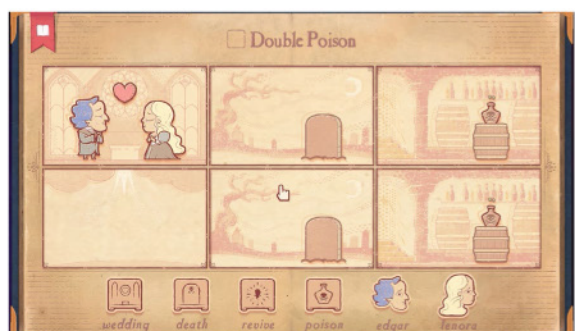
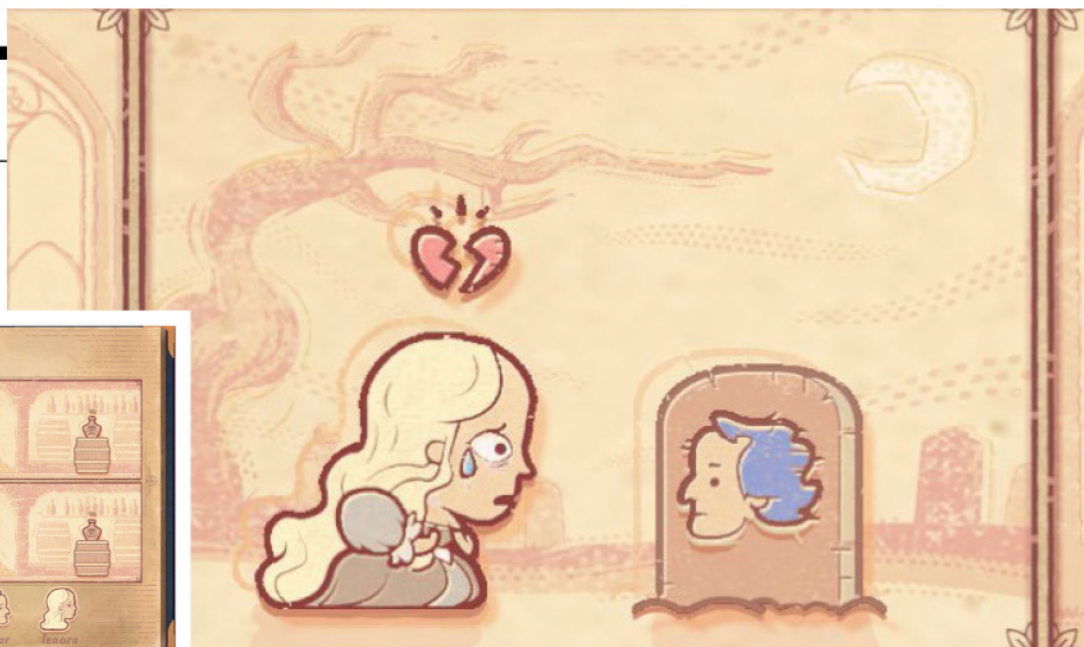
**BERNARD**  
This stand-up gent isn't out to harm anyone, unless he happens to go out during a full moon...

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Storyteller* is a uniquely inventive and chucklesome puzzle game that could do with a little more substance.

76





**ABOVE:** Some puzzles ask you to solve them in different ways.

**FAR LEFT:** The stories are presented in a book, divided into multiple chapters.

**BELOW:** Amnesia is one of many classic plot devices that gets an airing.





All the channels are tuned to horror stories, or empty static you'll skip past.



Marcelo: It's going to be fun to mess with these guys!➡

# PRESTIGE TV

Explore a horror story with your remote in **NIGHTMARE ZAPPER**

**T**here hasn't been this much horror in a TV screen since the terrifying film *Ring*. Thankfully, nothing crawls from the screen in *Nightmare Zapper*, but it does contain a whole network of channels that tell a connected horror story. You control it by clicking 'Next', as if browsing listlessly one night with the TV remote. While the majority of the numbers are tuned to static, you'll stumble across lots of horrific little snippets.

One channel tells the story of some kids playing football, as it starts to get dark outside. Spitefully, a kid kicks the ball out of sight – then has to live with the dreadful consequences. Like half of the vignettes in *Nightmare Zapper*, this story isn't interactive, bar your ability to leave at any time by clicking the Next or Previous Channel buttons.

If you do so, you can return later to watch it again from the beginning. But there are also interactive stories, with endings that can change the state of the meta-narrative. You make dialogue choices, or in one case solve simple point-and-click puzzles. The most substantial of these stories is one where you get up, have breakfast and pray, before leaving the house.

It's not immediately obvious how you can change the outcome of this scene – but the solution, fear not, is in this sprawling game *somewhere*. I would have welcomed more of this meta stuff, but there is *just enough*

here to make your eyes light up as you comb the channels for clues, and cycle through them two or three times to reveal the true ending.

**Some of the stories are little more than punchlines**

## CHANNEL CROSSING

But the true stars of *Nightmare Zapper* are the vignettes themselves. With its channel-surfing framing, the game has a sleepy, late-night quality that the stories very much lean into. Imagine creepypastas mixed with *WarioWare*: short urban horror stories with a twist in the tale, and each only a couple of minutes

## NEED TO KNOW

### WHAT IS IT?

A horror game in a TV set, which you control by changing the channel

### EXPECT TO PAY

Free

### DEVELOPER

Maldo19

### PUBLISHER

In-house

### REVIEWED ON

Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

### MULTIPLAYER

No

### LINK

bit.ly/NightmareZapping

long. There's the couple dancing by moonlight – such a lovely scene, until we see the woman's face. There's the little girl who befriends the monster who has come to devour her.

Both the creepypasta and *WarioWare* elements are strengthened by the pixel art, which is extremely well-drawn but also reminds me of art made in MS Paint. There's a grungy, deceptively amateurish quality to it that I tend to associate with horror memes and Nintendo's minigames classic.

Some of the stories are little more than punchlines, and others are more involved and contribute to the overall narrative – but I remained gripped as I pressed Next Channel, over and over, to see what I'd uncover next.

Selfishly, I now want a bigger game, with more connections between the stories, and more instances of thinking outside the box – consider my appetite whetted. ■

**PC GAMER**

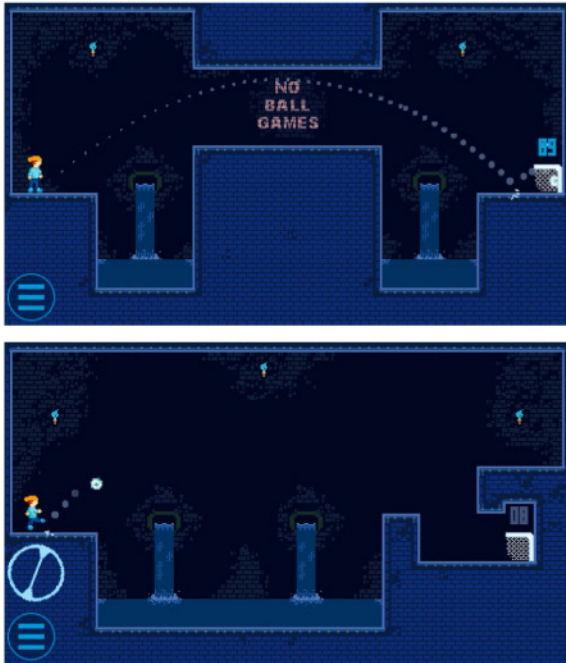
**VERDICT**

A collection of jagged horror tidbits, with a clever framing device that turns them into a cohesive narrative.

**79**



BELOW: It feels hugely satisfying to line up a shot correctly.



#### NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
Free

**DEVELOPER**  
Citizen Games

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/FreekickGame](http://bit.ly/FreekickGame)

## NET RESULT

Playing footie in a sewer in **FREEKICK UNDERGROUND**

**I**f you've ever attempted to dunk a basketball you'll know the pleasure that comes from trying to achieve perfection through repetition. *Freekick Underground* captures that pleasure with remarkable accuracy.

You, the free-kicker, are trying to reach some distant goalposts, which you have presumably lugged to the sewer for your subterranean pastime. Each of the 15 levels is a challenge of environmental geometry, as you try to apply *just* enough height and pressure to punt the ball into the back of the net with a single kick.

As you can't move the little footballer – just decide the height and power of their kick – there are only two keyboard keys to worry about: Up and Right. Up moves the height meter, and Right increases the power gauge. Get either wrong and

the ball will smack into blocking walls or plop into the water.

If you've played any golf game you'll be familiar with this swing-o-meter mechanic, although here you have to manage two meters at once. In the later levels I was applying a *touch* of height before quickly charging up a shot, my hand rushing from Up to Right on the keyboard.

Those later levels took a while to clear, then. The swing mechanics are so granular they allow for these little strokes of luck which combine with a growing skill, honed by clearing the early levels. Perfection through repetition, though without the frustration that often accompanies skill-based puzzle games. I think that's because this is so minimalist and easy to repeat for another try. I devoured those 15 levels, and was sad when they ended. ■

77

## DOCTOR DOCTOR

Save a monstrous medical centre in **BLACKOUT HOSPITAL**

**Y**ou play as a hospital janitor in this turn-based RPG, which combines a *Silent Hill*-like setting with vivid characters and enemies reminiscent of *Persona*. It begins with the solitary Vasilis (that's you) cleaning up spills around the hospital as usual, before a blackout turns your familiar world on its head.

Most of the staff and patients disappear, although there are now monstrous creatures and ghosts roaming round the halls. Initiate a fight – most won't attack first – and you're in familiar 16-bit RPG territory, especially when you've picked up a few party members.

There isn't a lot to chew on when it comes to combat, with only a few abilities per character, meaning you'll use the same tactics again and again. However, battles are a surprisingly

small part of the game, and you'll go long stretches without encountering enemies at all. The balance feels a bit off, then, but I did enjoy this other half of *Blackout Hospital* more, as I solved puzzles and conversed with vaguely sinister characters.

It's a shame a lot of it is so samey looking, as it can be hard to remember exactly which room you need to return to when backtracking. You can chat with your party, but never to ask for help, which feels like a missed opportunity.

At least you won't forget the characters: a memorable cast that includes a highly strung bride, a ravenous boy with an open stomach cavity, and Mary, a hospital patient with an enthusiasm that transcends her debilitating illness. It's an OK RPG, but you should play this one for the story and cast. ■

72

BELOW: You reluctantly take the lead when things go belly-up.



#### NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
Free

**DEVELOPER**  
arcadekitten

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/BlackoutHospital](http://bit.ly/BlackoutHospital)



A small part of me still thinks I've made a mistake releasing him.



## NORMANDY MORE

Back once again with the renegade **MASS-ter EFFECT 2**

**P**laying *Mass Effect 2* again is like waking up after a night out with the worst hangxiety of your life. Did I dance in the club? Punch that journalist? Accidentally join a human supremacist paramilitary organisation? You're reminded of every bad decision you've ever made, and, best of all, you get to make them all over again because nobody ever changes.

It's practically impossible to behave differently in a game that requires so much emotional investment. Every time I promise myself that this time, I'll play as a Renegade, but deep down I know I'm lying. I'm the person who never released Grunt from his tank on my first playthrough of *Mass Effect 2*, because the idea of unleashing a genetically engineered Krogan super soldier seemed too risky. (There's a Kroginger's cat joke in there somewhere.) My romances were equally doomed. I decided to skip past Miranda and Jack in favour of the 1,000-year old Asari justicar with the emotional delicacy of a walnut. My abiding memory is of us staring out into space after several awkward conversations that went nowhere.

### Playing differently shows me a different side of the game

Apparently a shared love of jurisprudence wasn't enough. Trying to be bad is difficult. The most noticeable thing about choosing the renegade options is how uncomfortable it all is. Every conversation is laced with the sort of bubbling, low-level aggression you only see from an Apprentice contestant seconds before they get fired. This is the confession of an overly-cautious people pleaser, but I don't feel like a badass choosing the surly option; I just feel like an ass. The draw of going back to ChillShep is almost irresistible, and never more so than when you meet an old crewmate. Choosing the grumpy option with Tali, for instance, feels like buying a toddler a balloon just so you can pop it.

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
Babylon 5, but you won't get lampooned for loving it

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£18

**DEVELOPER**  
BioWare

**PUBLISHER**  
EA

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1070

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/3JPSXr2](http://bit.ly/3JPSXr2)

### VORCHA GONNA DO

The moments where I'm not being insulting or aggressive remain breathtaking. I wasn't sure about the Cerberus thing the first time around – as shocking as the intro is, the reconstructed Shepard thing feels clumsy – but it brings ambiguity and purpose to the game. Little touches, like the reconstructed Normandy being better equipped, really give you a sense that things have progressed. Playing differently shows me a different side of the game, too. I was nervous about meeting Mordin as my abrasive self, not least because I was such good friends with him in my first playthrough. But the game is so deftly written that it remains convincing, even when a utilitarian doctor joins the crew of a Cerberus operative who's essentially hatred in a spacesuit. I'm never comfortable being a cosmic school bully, but at least I'll let Grunt out this time. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

Even when played as a socially-abrasive space Karen, *Mass Effect 2* remains the best game in the series.

93



BELOW: A griffin, the most noble of heraldic bea... wait, no, he's fuck ugly.



#### NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
£24

DEVELOPER  
Capcom

PUBLISHER  
In-house

## MANTICORE WORLDS

**DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN** makes being uncool, cool

**L**et's think of this in terms of karaoke. Nobody really enjoys it when someone's actually good at it. What you want is a group of people who try very hard but consistently fail to hit the high notes and are endearingly rubbish. *Dragon's Dogma* is the PC game equivalent of that.

It dreams so big. It's the person in the group who picks the Meat Loaf song, forgetting the required vocal range and three-minute instrumental bit. *Dragon's Dogma* promises a dynamic open world and an epic story, with combat that feels eccentric and unusual. And, for the most part, it delivers. There's something wonderfully adventurous about clambering up a cyclops and stabbing it in the eyeball, and the game's systems are tactile enough that you genuinely feel like you're interacting

with the world. You can even dismember certain monsters bit by bit, which resembles a satisfying mix of heroism and food preparation.

I also love the things it gets slightly wrong. All of the NPCs speak like fantasy characters who've been filtered through Google translate. It's impossible to hear sentences like "I grant you fire's blaze!" without thinking of inarticulate teenagers playing D&D in a place where the bullies can't find them. But, that's the vibe of *Dragon's Dogma*: raw, proud, fantasy tomfoolery, with no pretensions. In another developer's hands this would be crammed with sass, swearing, and flashy cosmetic upgrades. But this is a game of sincerity and sackcloth, where everything cool happens almost in spite of itself. It's the unironic heavy metal waistcoat of RPGs. ■

78

## GOD GOALS

Hell is a never-ending family affair in **HADES**

**R**ounding up the vague, mythical creature theme is *Hades*, a game that gets ten extra points because Cerberus is a big red dog you can pet, rather than a group of cash-stacked probably-racists. It's also the best game you'll ever play that lets you chat with sexy gods every time you die.

And die you will. Over and over and over again. But *Hades* is constructed in such a way that death rarely feels punitive. Supergiant excels at the story-driven stuff, and the additional narrative treasures you unlock at the start of each new run often outweigh any frustration. *Hades* is a flex; a powerlifter doing gymnastics, just to demonstrate that they can.

Those narrative threads are expertly woven into the weapons and upgrades, too. Some of these feel deliberately Hellenic, such as magic

shields and flying spears you can recall at will, but they sit handsomely alongside more esoteric stuff like the rail gun. And it's difficult to think of a better setting than the underworld for a game where you die repeatedly and spend hundreds of hours doing the same thing over and over. That might make *Hades* sound repetitive, and it is, in a very deliberate sense, but it's the sort of thing you'll love doing over and over, like eating roast potatoes or stepping on semi-frozen puddles. Combine that with the chance to ruffle mythical dog ears and chat shit with Dionysus – a sort of grape-bedecked party uncle on the cusp of a transformative breakdown – and you have the sort of game that feels Sisyphean at times, but only if endlessly rolling boulders up hills was funny, vibrant, and very different every single time. ■

BELOW: Only Supergiant can make a underworld seem this pretty.



#### NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
£21

DEVELOPER  
Supergiant Games

PUBLISHER  
In-house

89



# FALCONEER CHRONICLES BULWARK



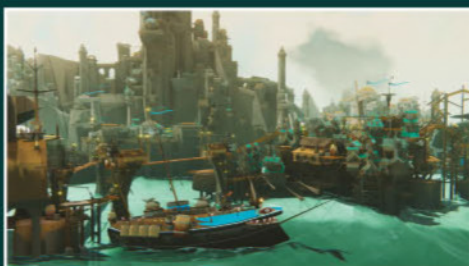
## EVOLVING DEMO

## PLAY FOR FREE TODAY

Bulwark is about kitbashing fortresses and settlements in an open world, the haunting landscapes of The Great Ursee. There is no scrollable view of a single map, there is a explorable 3D world in which you can build on any rock, cliff and mountain you can find.

Build without a grid or planar restriction, up or down it does not matter, it's a 3D builder. This requires a novel approach to building, something that isn't about clicking over a screen but focusing on the world itself. In this sense the game is one of experimental gameplay and controls, supported by a world and settlement that comes alive before your eyes.

Let your creativity run wild as you become the creator of your own Bulwark.



## AVAILABLE ON STEAM NOW

Forgoing the 'beta route', Tomas Sala is launching the first 'evolving demo' that will see players help shape Bulwark: Falconeer Chronicles in a way never before seen. With live demo updates based on real-time player feedback, Tomas is lifting the lid on his development and utilising his passionate community of gamers to help him craft his vision, with the game on show and playable much earlier than traditional campaigns.



SCAN TO VIEW  
ON STEAM

A GAME BY  
**TOMAS SALA**

 @FalconeerDev

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# HARDWARE

GET THE SPEAKERS GAMES DESERVE

**94**

## GROUP TEST

Top PC audio systems rated.

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Are gaming laptops still relevant?

**100**

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The rise and fall of Bonzi Buddy.

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## BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.





## GROUP TEST

SPEAKERS AND  
SOUNDBARS

Let's test some tweeters and woofers to see which deliver bone-rattling, Earth-shattering audio. *By Jacob Ridley*

**T**here are days when I want to throw my gaming headset off my head. Not out of rage. No, I suffer from something called uncomfortable ear lobes from wearing those damned things all day. It's in these tough times that I look to my pair of trusty PC speakers to deliver bass-thumping audio instead.

For many years PC speakers have been ruled by nondescript towers that left a lot to be

desired in terms of audio quality and oomph. Thankfully, PC gaming's obsession with overkill has led manufacturers to craft some truly extraordinary speakers to set down on your desk. Even going as far as a soundbar with a head-tracking, beam-forming AI built-in. Neat.

There really are many options to choose from nowadays. Thankfully that's why our team exists. We've put six popular options on test, from the best of the best gaming kit to a still surprisingly awesome saver option.

## G560

LOGITECH **£209**

## Firm favourite

**1** The Logitech G560 speakers have been around for a good few years now. But if you're already bringing an impressive 2:1 setup, why change things? This Logitech kit is something I'm particularly familiar with – I've been using them on my desk at home for many years, swapping them back in whenever I was done testing the next new thing.

There's something snappy and simple about the interface on the Logitech G560, and RGB LEDs are visible on the back and sides of each tweeter. There are a few fun RGB modes, even, which

admittedly I've long turned off. The important thing is that the two tweeters produce detailed audio capable of immersing you wholly. No 2:1 speaker is going to offer a proper surround sound experience, but the G560 is a great-sounding speaker setup for its simple form factor. The bass is heavy out of the box, but can be toned back for day-to-day use, and you really can pump the volume up to 11.

**PC GAMER** VERDICT

- Great bass
- Decent app control
- Often discounted today

**SPECS** TYPE: 2:1 / **SETUP**: 2X 2-INCH TWEETERS, 1X 6.5-INCH SUBWOOFER / **CONNECTIVITY**: USB TYPE-A, BLUETOOTH, 3.5MM / **LIGHTING**: YES, RGB

## Leviathan V2 Pro

RAZER **£400**

## A real smarty

**2** This head tracking soundbar is designed to wrap your ears with positional gaming audio. With how often 'AI' is thrown around these days I must admit I was a little sceptical, but I'm pleasantly surprised by how well it works.

Razer uses an integrated infrared camera to keep track of your head as you move about. The AI is responsible for deciding where your ears are at all times, which admittedly sounds more of a job for a clever algorithm than strictly AI, but sure, I'll bite. Beamforming is then applied to create either headphone-like

positional audio or virtual surround sound. The Virtual Headset mode causes the audio to sound as though it originates directly in front of me. It's neat and even the virtual surround works better than expected to wrap me in positional audio without the actual hardware. The issue is the price. Head tracking is more than a party trick but is a non-essential feature, and I don't want to pay the premium for it.

**PC GAMER** VERDICT

- Head tracking
- It really works
- The cost

**SPECS** TYPE: 5:1 (SOUNDBAR) / **SETUP**: 5X 2-INCH TWEETERS, 1X 5.25-INCH SUBWOOFER / **CONNECTIVITY**: 3.5MM / **LIGHTING**: NO



## AI IS RESPONSIBLE FOR DECIDING WHERE YOUR EARS ARE



### SPEAKER OR SOUNDBAR?

With the growing popularity of TV soundbars, we've seen a rise in popularity for PC-focused soundbars for the desktop. That's not a bad thing. There's some stuff a soundbar can offer that a speaker set can't, or at least not without cables going everywhere. The main thing we tend to see is an increase in tweeters and mid-range drivers in a single soundbar, which can make for an increase in depth and clarity in the overall audio.

Where speakers offer the most flexibility is in how you set them up. A soundbar usually takes up a lot of space on a desk, whereas speakers are a lot easier to shift around. Also where soundbars are usually front-facing speakers, you can set up speakers on a wider stage and angle them towards you for a better sense of positional audio in-game.



**DELIVERS  
BRILLIANT,  
LIVELY AUDIO  
FROM JUST TWO  
TWEETERS**



3

## Arena 7

STEELSERIES £300

### Nice 'n' pricey

**3** SteelSeries will turn its hand to just about anything these days, and its foray into gaming speakers is a surprising success. The Arena 7 is actually the middle child in the company's Arena lineup, encompassing two tweeters and a subwoofer, though lacking the rear and central speakers that make up the pricier Arena 9. The Arena 7 delivers brilliant, lively audio from just those two tweeters. Whether in-game or listening to music, there's plenty enough accuracy and range to deliver an impressive sound quality. That's

also down to the included subwoofer, which uses a 6.5-inch driver to pump out some serious sound waves. The bass was a little much at times, especially if you're sharing your space with others, but you can turn it down with a knob on the subwoofer itself. Is the SteelSeries Arena 7 the speaker set to buy? Its price tag makes it a tougher recommendation without due consideration of other ones.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Striking audio
- Modern design
- Too expensive

**SPECS** TYPE: 2:1 / **SETUP**: 2X 0.75-INCH TWEETERS, 1X 6.5-INCH SUBWOOFER / **CONNECTIVITY**: USB TYPE-C, BLUETOOTH, OPTICAL, 3.5MM / **LIGHTING**: YES, RGB

## UltraGear GP9

LG £227

### Surprisingly portable

**4** The LG UltraGear GP9 has a secret double life. It's a PC soundbar that will snugly fit in your monitor stand by day, and a portable speaker with a five-hour battery life by night. It's an odd choice, as the speaker isn't the smallest by portable standards, but it's a neat party trick. The UltraGear GP9 serves up pretty good positional audio for a soundbar. It has a FPS mode that's decent for more competitive gaming, but if you want more you can also plug in a headset into the jack on the soundbar and it'll output with 7.1 virtual surround sound. But that's

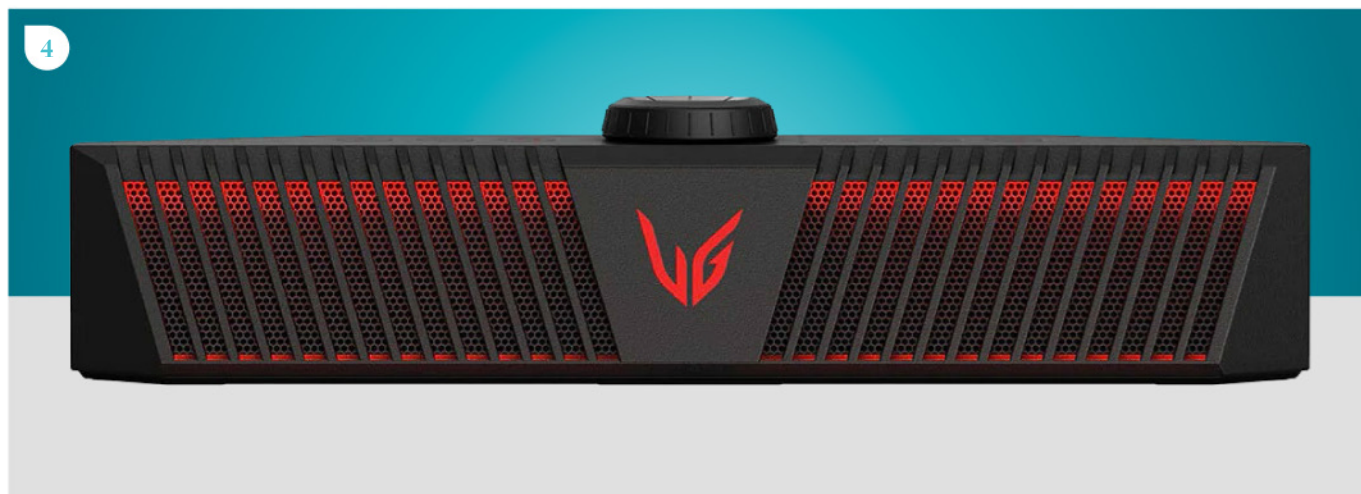
besides the point. There's also a microphone built-in that's good for Discord chatting and work calls. The only downside is that when you're playing loud game audio out of the speaker, the mic has a tougher time picking out your voice, and it's not super clear. Clearly, the GP9 is pretty versatile. But it's also true that you could focus purely on audio and grab something better in that regard for less cash.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Doubles as a portable
- No sub
- That price

**SPECS** TYPE: 4:1 (SOUNDBAR) / **SETUP**: 2X 0.75-INCH TWEETERS, 2X 2-INCH WOOFERS / **CONNECTIVITY**: OPTICAL, 3.5MM, BLUETOOTH, AND USB-C / **LIGHTING**: YES, RGB





## Sound Blaster Katana V2

CREATIVE £320

### Multi-functional

5 While most soundbars are built to sit under a TV, the Sound Blaster Katana V2 is much better suited to resting under a gaming monitor. Naturally, that means it's plastered in RGB LEDs, but there's much more to this soundbar than fancy-looking lights. One of the Katana V2's strengths lies in its multiple types of speaker driver. There are the two standard tweeters, just 0.75-inch on this model, which cover off the high-end frequencies. To bolster these slightly smaller high-end tweeters there are two 2.5-inch midrange

drivers. Separating the two helps the Katana V2 deliver a detailed sound throughout the entire range, down to the bass.

Ensuring the bass is pumping adequately you have a 6.5-inch subwoofer. This is a rather tall sub compared to some, but it delivers plenty of kick when required. The other strength of the Creative is its many connectivity options. And it comes with a remote.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Tons of connectivity
- Remote control
- Takes up space

**SPECS** TYPE: 4:1 (SOUNDBAR) / **SETUP**: 2X 0.75-INCH TWEETERS, 2X 2.5-INCH MID-RANGE, 1X 6.5-INCH SUBWOOFER / **CONNECTIVITY**: OPTICAL, 3.5MM, BLUETOOTH, AND USB-C / **LIGHTING**: YES, RGB

## Pebble Plus

CREATIVE £39

### Budget hero

6 There are a lot of options for budget PC speakers. You can scroll through page after page of them on most major retailers' websites. Yet for all the noise there's only one speaker set on a budget that we keep coming back to: Creative's Pebble Plus.

These simple 2:1 speakers have barely changed in years, and they're still absolutely awesome for the money. Creative is primarily an audio company, and that helps it deliver quality sounding kit even on a budget. There are a couple of Pebble options to choose from, but don't

worry we have a recommendation.

The Creative Pebble Plus is the same two tweeter setup you'll find across the stack, but it comes with a decently powerful subwoofer to add much more depth and power on the low-end. We tend to miss a subwoofer when we don't have one, and for a small amount more than the sub-less versions it's well worth the extra money.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Affordable
- Small footprint
- Bass light

**SPECS** TYPE: 2:1 / **SETUP**: 2X 2-INCH TWEETERS, 1X 4-INCH SUBWOOFER / **CONNECTIVITY**: 3.5MM / **LIGHTING**: NO





The lappy fused to the table long ago. He just hasn't realised yet.

# CHARGE DEPLETED

**PORTABLE GAMING**'s a broader church than ever – are laptops still relevant?

**P**laying our PC games anywhere other than a dedicated room full of beige machinery was, not so long ago, a profound and supremely challenging undertaking. It meant carrying around not just the discs of the interactive wonders we hoped to sample in a train carriage or car backseat, but also a gaming laptop whose cooling fans could drown out a fire alarm.

Portable gaming once referred to this very specific thing: a laptop with high specs which you could, in a pinch, use to play games on. Providing the sun wasn't too bright or you wouldn't be able to see the screen. And there was an available plug socket at all times. And you didn't mind being responsible for the sound of an Airbus A380 jet engine idling while you played. Thankfully, technology caught up to our demand for gaming in the wild and found more ways to package up that proposition than is strictly useful. Handheld consoles. Mini PCs. Smartphones. Tablets. Gaming-focused smartphones. And now, portable PC gaming's final form, the Steam Deck.

## HIT THE DECK

Steam's latest big project wasn't about changing the way PC gamers play games across the board. If we weren't resolutely stubborn consumers who comforted ourselves in the warm blanket of tradition, we'd have ditched the desktop PC as our

primary gaming station years ago. No, that's a red line for us. Componentry must be stacked within a rectangular tower full of only the drippiest of RGB fans, hooked up to a standalone display, and a mouse and keyboard must be waiting for us on a desk. That'll always feel like home to us, one suspects. The Steam Deck's just an additional part of that ecosystem. Plan B. The thing we pick up when we're going out, heading to bed, or simply can't be bothered to sit upright.

And that puts the venerable, gaming laptop in a bind. That was what laptops were for, until now. The barriers were always there – prices for a high-spec model equivalent to a desktop machine have nearly always been as much or more than the aforementioned desktop machine since you're paying for a panel too. They ran hot and loud, and the screens historically compared extremely unfavourably with a desktop monitor. But despite those very real barriers, the damn things sold like leg-searing hot cakes.

In 2013, portable PCs outsold desktop machines worldwide by 178.4m units shipped to 136.7m. The gap has widened over time, too – by 2018 that disparity had grown to 172.5m portable and 119.2m desktop units. That's according to data from analyst firm IDC, and for those of us who see desktop PC gaming as the main event, the gap's striking.

By contrast, Steam Deck's still a niche sub-platform. Gaben's gang have sold around a million units in the first year, which means it'd account for just over 0.5% of those total



## Early pioneers

Where and when did gaming laptops become a thing? As Razer would have it, the format started in 2010 with the Razer Blade, the first 'true' gaming laptop. An Nvidia GT555M and a 2.7GHz i7 CPU? Shut up and take my \$2,799, Razer. However, Alienware's M17x made it to market earlier, back in 2009. It's even got RGB zones – surely it's the godfather of it all? Far from it: the true originator is Alienware's own Area 51m, released in 2003.





**FAR LEFT:** Alienware's new-gen X16 is gorgeous, but the same old problems endure.

**LEFT:** Steam Deck's 1m in sales after just a year is significant. Laptops must respond, and quickly.

## BATT'S ALL, FOLKS *The Mount Rushmore of laptop-friendly gaming*



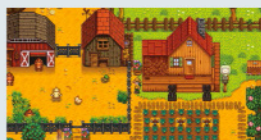
### FOOTBALL MANAGER

An entire ecosystem of sport, recreated spreadsheet by spreadsheet, all folded down onto your laptop in a manner that doesn't make it melt.



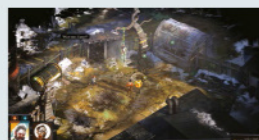
### PERSONA 5 ROYAL

Something about the daily schedule of *Persona* makes it perfect for portable gaming. Even if you play for only one in-game day, you achieve something.



### STARDEW VALLEY

Build a ruthlessly functional agricultural enterprise, get married, win an ice fishing contest, fold up laptop, depart train, forget laptop on train, panic.



### DISCO ELYSIUM

If portable gaming is about Tardis-like virtual worlds contained on small hardware, it doesn't get bigger or richer than ZA/UM's excellent RPG.

portable units shipped in 2018. So judging by the numbers alone, the old stalwarts bringing laptops to market are safe. But it's only been a year, and the Deck has significant buzz around it. Traditional gaming laptops might not be obsolete by next year, but there's a sense that significant innovation's needed if they're still going to retain their market position in five years.

### PANEL SHOW

What are those innovations? OLED screens look like the strongest play. This is an upgrade most of us have been sleeping on, waiting for that elusive combination of OLED screen tech, high refresh rate and sensible price. But if you're buying a laptop, you're investing in a new display too. Right now, most OLED laptops are aimed at designers and creators – the OLED-equipped Asus Zenbook has a touchscreen, and HP's Envy and XPS OLED lines are specced out for power users rather than gamers. Only Acer seems to be speaking to the player with its Predator Triton 300 SE, but it's a 2022 model with Nvidia 30-series hardware, so not the perfect pick for testing out *Cyberpunk's* Psycho preset.

When the next generation of gaming-focused OLED lappies arrive, though, that's an opportunity to turn the traditional desktop gamer's head. If the specs can compete with a mid-to-high desktop build, what before might have felt a needless frivolity suddenly seems like a canny cost-saving move – a new PC and monitor in one purchase.

Indeed, with the price of many PC gaming components and accessories increasing dramatically right now – just look

at the rapid rise in graphics card pricing over the past few years – the idea that you could get two upgrades in one will no doubt really appeal to many gamers. I know it does for me.

Where laptop stakeholders are really placing renewed emphasis, though, is on bringing machines to market that appeal to more than gaming. Models like Alienware's revamped X16 and Asus ROG's M line are positioned as gaming-infused workstations, as happy with a Premiere Pro project full of resource-hungry transitions as they are with Ark on max settings. Here, again, it's all about value. No need

to bother with that Macbook Pro, invest in one machine that does work and play equally well. Of course, that's always been true of gaming laptops – if you've got the specs to run modern games you've also got an editing rig. What laptop manufacturers can't do anything about, though, is the fact both video editing and music production are such Mac-centric endeavours. Buy all the

componentry you like – Pro Tools still works better on MacOS. Many firms are actively combatting this, but it takes time to change perceptions and the current reality.

If Nvidia and AMD could bridge the gap between the desktop and laptop versions of their GPUs, we'd have another reason to renew our interest in the laptop format, but that's a race the poor mobile GPU can never win. And besides, handheld PCs like the Steam Deck would benefit from such innovations, too. Check and mate, laptops. OLED screens and productivity pave the road forwards for the format, but it'll be a tense battle between those motivators and the Steam Deck's sheer convenience. What have you done, Valve? ■

**Phil Iwanik**

**THERE'S A SENSE  
THAT SIGNIFICANT  
INNOVATION'S  
NEEDED**



# PURPLE PATCH

**BONZI BUDDY**, the desktop companion who did \$1bn of damage

**I**t's 1999. A young PC enthusiast in a North Yorkshire village is having his little idiot mind blown on a weekly basis now he's the proud owner of a personal computer. It's a kaleidoscope of formative experiences:

*Half-Life*. *Thief: The Dark Project*. PC Gamer magazine and its many in-jokes (beards and tanks were especially in-vogue topics of tomfoolery for then editor Jim Flynn's band of raconteurs). Doing his homework by pasting passages directly out of the Encarta CDs that came with the aforementioned PC. And then, one day during a maths lesson, comes something entirely different.

"He does all sorts", my friend Thomas Frame enthuses. "Tells jokes, sings songs. You can type stuff in and he says it. He's got games, too." This desktop character he's describing sounds absolutely brilliant. A purple gorilla who sits on your desktop and serves to entertain your every whim. My

13-year-old mind is already racing with the things I'd make him say. Upon Frame's dictation, I write down the name of the website where he can be downloaded on the inside cover of my DT book. We all do.

And that, more or less, is how one of the most notorious examples of spyware came to permeate the computing landscape around the millennium. Bonzi Buddy was a lightning in a bottle moment. A brilliant bit of marketing from Bonzi Software, who rightly recognised that although Microsoft's office assistant Clippy had gone down about as well with the public as an invitation to rub their faces against vinegar-soaked cheese graters,

there was still something in the idea of anthropomorphising the computer. The Tamagotchi had recently released in '96, and the rabid consumer behaviour it prompted tells you everything about how into the idea we all were of treating technology like a sentient friend.

## AT SURFACE LEVEL, BONZI BUDDY MADE GOOD ON HIS PROMISE

### VERY APE

Bonzi Software's great innovation to date had previously been a program that let you send voice clips through email. Brothers Joe and Jay Bonzi developed other programs too through the mid-'90s which promised increased internet safety and the like, in fact making some pretty simple changes to Windows 95's internet settings. This was the wild frontier of computing – nobody really knew how it all worked yet. We'd try just about anything new just for the novelty factor alone, and we hadn't had the time or experience to grow cynical or suspicious about the programs we installed. The perfect storm.

Bonzi Buddy exploited every single one of these factors. It looked novel and appealing, offered an experience like we hadn't had before, and its features seemed like they could be useful if you didn't know much about computers yet. The final seduction – the fact that it was all packaged up as a friendly, harmless cartoon character – would give Bonzi Buddy particular appeal among children. Children like me and my mates.

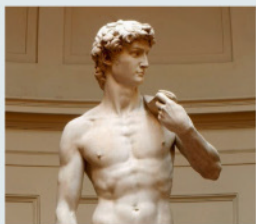
At surface level, Bonzi Buddy made good on his promise. He did sing, he did tell jokes, and some of those jokes were even pretty good if you were pubescent in 1999 ("What did the digital clock say to the grandfather clock? Look Pa, no hands!" Richard Pryor eat your heart out). The calendar scheduling features, like the rest of his productivity-based functionality, was really just a shortcut to an existing Windows feature. But I didn't care about those anyway. I now had a toy who would say rude utterances for me on command. That was enough.

### SIMIAN SAYS

Beneath the benign grape-purple facade lay a more sinister application, though. Bonzi Buddy would repeatedly, and without consent, change your homepage to the Bonzi

## GOING VIRAL

*The Mount Rushmore of internet malware*



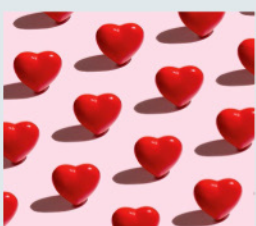
### MICHAELANGELO

The media created a frenzy when it estimated five million PCs would be affected by this DOS virus in 1992.



### FORM

Essentially the Roger Federer of viruses: originated in Switzerland, remained at large for over 20 years.



### I LOVE YOU

How vulnerable is human nature to vanity? The ten million PCs infected by this virus via a 'love letter' email answers that.



### MELISSA

Sends you a "An important message from [username]", mass mails the same message from your account.



### PHIL IWANIUK

When Phil Iwanik's not writing for PC Gamer or dreaming up ads, he's keeping funds safe for various princes, winning Amazon vouchers, or managing his Onecoin portfolio.



"If I can make the jokes  
just 1% funnier, this  
thing's going global..."



Software site. It would create ad popups, and worse, popups designed to look like Windows error messages. Your Windows install is deathly ill, they'd imply. The only solution now is to install this piece of Bonzi Software which will magically fix it. Here, let's visit the product page now. Under the surface of even that annoying activity, Bonzi Buddy was harvesting your personal data and uploading it back to Bonzi Software's servers without your knowledge or consent. And it would be the latter, coupled with the software's particular popularity with children, which would prove the downfall of that damn duplicitous ape.

### DONKEY WRONG

The lawsuits began to roll in during the early 2000s. First was a class action lawsuit based around the popup ads disguised as Windows messages, which sought \$1.6bn in total damages – that one was settled for \$175,000. But Bonzi Software faced increasing legal heat as time went on. Next came an order from the US Federal Trade Commission for Bonzi to pay another \$75,000 for breaching the Children's Online Privacy Protection act by collecting the personal info of children under 13 without consent. The company folded that same year.

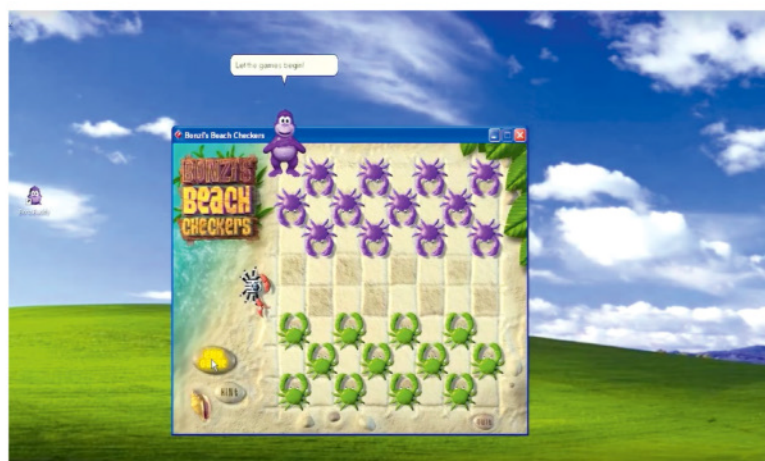
Ironically, with no parent company to harvest your data to or to serve you ads, Bonzi Buddy is now considered pretty harmless and is still available on third-party sites as a relic from the early internet. He might have been programmed with countless songs and gags to keep you interacting with him, but all the while Bonzi Buddy knew the real joke was on you. ■

*Phil Iwaniuk*



**LEFT:** Windows was still a mystery to us in the '90s. We were absolute marks.

**BELOW:** All malware should assume the form of cartoon animals. Can we make that the law?





YOUR NEXT PC

# BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



## KEY

### *Budget build*

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

### *Mid-range build*

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

### *Advanced build*

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

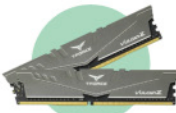
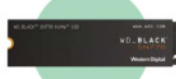


# BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



**TOTAL**  
**£999**

|               |                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>B660M Pro RS</b><br>ASRock <b>£115</b><br>This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.                       |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i5 13400F</b><br>Intel <b>£210</b><br>Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.                        |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>Radeon RX 6600</b><br>AMD <b>£256</b><br>AMD's RX 6600 has become a budget champ for its affordable price and great 1080p performance.                                |
| COOLER        |    | <b>Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)</b><br>Intel <b>Free</b><br>There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.                   |
| MEMORY        |    | <b>T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB</b><br>Teamgroup <b>£45</b><br>Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.                                                                     |
| POWER SUPPLY  |   | <b>Pylon 450</b><br>XPG <b>£45</b><br>With an RX 6600 in tow we can get away with a 450W PSU, and the Pylon is just that.                                                |
| SSD           |  | <b>WD Black SN770 500GB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£38</b><br>It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.             |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm</b><br>Western Digital <b>£38</b><br>You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder. |
| CASE          |  | <b>Zauron</b><br>Aerocool <b>£32</b><br>This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.                                  |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>GW2280</b><br>BenQ <b>£105</b><br>A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.                        |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>G213</b><br>Logitech <b>£40</b><br>It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.        |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>G102</b><br>Logitech <b>£35</b><br>A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.                |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>HS35</b><br>Corsair <b>£40</b><br>This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – it's perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.    |



# MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



**TOTAL**  
**£1,631**

|               |                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>B660M Mortar WiFi</b><br>MSI <b>£180</b><br>This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.                                     |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i5 13400F</b><br>Intel <b>£210</b><br>Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.                                  |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>Radeon RX 6700 XT</b><br>AMD <b>£390</b><br>Price cuts have made this graphics card the one to beat at 1440p.                                                                                  |
| COOLER        |    | <b>Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)</b><br>Intel <b>£Free</b><br>Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while      |
| MEMORY        |    | <b>Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200</b><br>Corsair <b>£45</b><br>With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.                              |
| POWER SUPPLY  |   | <b>CX650M</b><br>Corsair <b>£93</b><br>The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.                                                   |
| SSD           |  | <b>WD Black SN770 1TB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£70</b><br>There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.                                                     |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm</b><br>Western Digital <b>£38</b><br>Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space. |
| CASE          |  | <b>H7</b><br>NZXT <b>£120</b><br>It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.                                                         |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>S2722DGM</b><br>Dell <b>£260</b><br>With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.                                            |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>Alloy FPS</b><br>HyperX <b>£80</b><br>As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.                                           |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>Model O-</b><br>Glorious <b>£59</b><br>Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.                               |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>Blackshark V2</b><br>Razer <b>£94</b><br>The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.                                             |



# ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



**TOTAL**  
**£5,445**

|               |                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>MPG Z790 Carbon WiFi</b><br>MSI <b>£483</b><br>This MSI motherboard brings the latest chipset to bear without going overboard on excessive features.                           |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i9 13900K</b><br>Intel <b>£589</b><br>This is the best all-round processor money can buy. It's a little overkill, but that's what this build is all about.                |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce RTX 4090 Founders Ed</b><br>Nvidia <b>£1,699</b><br>The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.                |
| COOLER        |    | <b>Kraken X63</b><br>NZXT <b>£123</b><br>One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.                  |
| MEMORY        |    | <b>Trident Z5 RGB</b><br>G.Skill <b>£188</b><br>This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.                        |
| POWER SUPPLY  |   | <b>Prime TX-1000</b><br>Seasonic <b>£340</b><br>An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.                      |
| BOOT DRIVE    |  | <b>WD Black SN850X 2TB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£167</b><br>WD makes a mean PCIe 4.0 SSD, and the SN850X is its best to-date.                                                    |
| DATA DRIVE    |  | <b>Crucial P5 Plus 2TB</b><br>Crucial <b>£177</b><br>This isn't as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.                                |
| CASE          |  | <b>5000D</b><br>Corsair <b>£155</b><br>We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.                                             |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>34 QD-OLED (AW3423DW)</b><br>Alienware <b>£1,099</b><br>You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.              |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>G915 Lightspeed</b><br>Logitech <b>£185</b><br>Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.                      |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>G502 Lightspeed</b><br>Logitech <b>£110</b><br>With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest. |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>Arctis 7 Wireless</b><br>SteelSeries <b>£130</b><br>If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.              |



# EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



## “The constant fear that I’m going to uppercut a lamp is a little distracting”

Can you get better at real boxing with **THE THRILL OF THE FIGHT**'s VR boxing?

**O**ne difficulty for the novice boxer is the way other boxers try to punch you in the face, and what to do about that. Beginners often turn away and hunch over, which communicates the thought “please stop punching me”, but does not stop the punching, and certainly does not project the kind of skill and decorum a judge is looking for. This may be a rare problem that videogames can help with.

I got into amateur boxing a couple years ago, and I spar just about every week. I try to spend lots of time training at the gym between those sessions, but alas, I often have to be at home, since it's where I live. There are many things I can practice at home, but without a training partner, my defensive drills are limited: the

### TYLER WILDE



**THIS MONTH**  
Got punched, virtually and for real.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Hellish Quart, The Finals*

difference between actually dodging a punch and pretending to dodge a punch can be summed up by the fact that I never get hit by the imaginary ones. That's what led me to the idea that I should try a VR boxing game.

I can't really be 'hit' by VR punches, either, but I figured they might look real enough that I could drill out unwanted reflexes and replace them with the suave slips, rolls, pulls and pivots of a pro. I won't keep you in suspense: VR boxing has not Neo'd the moves of Floyd Mayweather Jr into my brain. I think

**TOP:** Weaving under big hooks is a workout on its own.

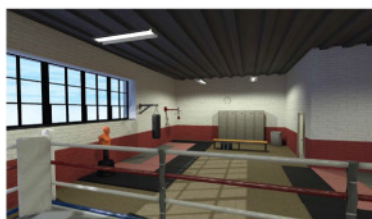
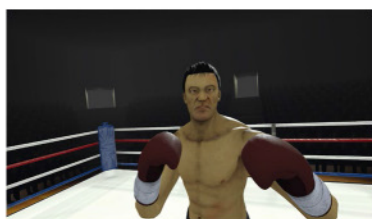
it has slightly helped improve my composure in the ring, though, which may be the first time playing a videogame has helped me solve a problem rather than avoid one.

### SHADOW BOXING

There are other VR boxing games on the horizon, but for now, *The Thrill of the Fight* is the best. It's got that understated, DIY feeling a lot of good VR games have: aside from a few training features, it's just some virtual boxers to fight with lots of customisation options. I can speed up or slow down my opponent's punches, or tell them to only throw

**VR BOXING HAS NOT NEO'D THE MOVES OF FLOYD MAYWEATHER JR INTO ME**





hooks, which is just what I needed for anti-flinch training.

It definitely ain't perfect. Among other issues, I can't get the AI boxers to behave anything like the ones I spar with. They hardly ever jab even when I tell them to only throw jabs, for example. The constant fear that I'm going to uppercut a lamp is a little distracting, too, but *The Thrill of the Fight* gives me what I wanted: lots of 'punches' coming at my face, which if nothing else has helped acclimatise me to being punched at.

I can't quite say the experience feels 'realistic', but it's close enough that I'm not sure someone who isn't trying to get better at boxing would enjoy it. Without some fundamentals to practice, you'd just be whaling on air. Me, I'm whaling on air, but also avoiding getting hit by air. (I have a keen enough mind to never try to see what I look like doing this.)

My schemes to learn non-videogame skills in videogames have never worked before, so I'm delighted by this small success, which offers another perspective on VR: a way to safely work on real world challenges rather than an escape from them. If anyone makes a VR game that simulates setting healthy relationship boundaries, let me know. ■



## “I find Simon hiding in a wardrobe”

Falling into darkness in **VAMPIRE: TM – BLOODLINES**

▶ ROBERT JONES



**THIS MONTH**  
Spent too long wiping blood off his boots.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Outcast*, *Half-Life*,  
*WH40K: Darktide*

**I**'m in a dark, downtown, urban alleyway surrounded by rubbish and rats, and I'm vomiting up blood in vast quantities. Needless to say, my stylish French ankle boots are not looking so spiffy any more.

I'm unsure if I'm hurling epically because I've just sent a innocent TV producer called Simon to his grave in the most gruesome, soulless way possible, or because I've just drunk blood from a hobo which, well, doesn't agree with my refined, aristocratic, Ventrue tastes.

### SUCK IT AND SEE

Simon, you see, was the key to me getting two powerful occult items from an ancient flesh-eating vampire called Pisha. Simon had fled from Pisha after his seeing his entire TV crew attacked and consumed by her.

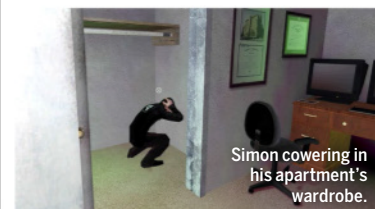
Could I have killed Pisha for the cannibalistic monstrosity she is? Yes, sure, but then I would never have got my cold dead hands on those powerful occult items, which will buff my beautiful female vampire Natasha really rather nicely for the back half of the game.

So, instead, I stare into the black voids that are Pisha's eyes and confirm that I will indeed track down Simon and make him return. A little sleuthing and I find out that the big-shot TV producer is staying in the nearby Skyline Apartments, which I visit and enter in ways that may not exactly be legal.

At first the apartment appears to be empty, but using my vampiric senses (in other words, my memory of playing this game many times before) I find Simon hiding in a wardrobe, mentally scarred and seriously shaken from seeing his crew eaten alive.

But, not to worry I tell Simon, it was all one big joke by the crew. They're all alive and laughing their asses off at how they managed to scare you with a piece of exquisite pranking. They're all waiting for Simon back at the show's set right now, so off you pop like a good, fooled producer. Simon takes me at my word and, well, that's the last time I see him alive.

Returning to Pisha, the bloody, dismembered remains of Simon are evident on her sacrificial dining table and, shortly after, I'm vomiting up blood in that alleyway. ■





# “I could finally fit my zoo out with mesmerising butterfly species”

Discovering the first-person Easter eggs in **ANNO 1800**

**W**itness the untamed glory of my shining empire, in her majesty's name. Here at the dawn of industry, my friends and I have been setting sail on the high seas, probing the new world for fascinating beasts and trinkets, and witnessing strange metamorphoses in *Anno 1800* – that last one a feature the devs snuck in, and one that shocked me to my very core.

Thanks in no small part to the resolve of the HMS Tube Worm's faithful crew, my city had expanded further than ever before. My artisans were finally satisfied, growing fat on a diet of sausages and stew. And having discovered an essentially limitless source of income from shipping soap to the stinky boys at the local jail, I was doing well enough that I was able to raise a zoo just down the road from the university.

Between the barrage of lewd comments from Sir Archibald and the constant annoyance of peasants unable to deal with their lost farm animals without the mayor getting involved, I found the time to discover

**▶ KATIE WICKENS**



**THIS MONTH**  
Broke the laws of physics with some non-human besties.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Detroit: Become Human*,  
*Untitled Goose Game*

first-person mode. Slipping into this new perspective, a fresh set of requests presented themselves. Their rewards came in the form of superhuman abilities, and after a couple of quests I was able run at the speed of light and I could also shoot jets of water from my eyeballs.

## MANBEARBOAT

Now that my adventures into the unknown had landed me with all manner of creatures from lands beyond, I could finally fit my zoo out with mesmerising butterfly species, an arctic fox, and even some

domestic pigs that had somehow snuffled their way into my inventory. At which point I was ready to show off my veritable menagerie, so I asked my friends to pop over for a visit.

“I’m here,” one chimed, though as I stalked around our meeting place at the zoo entrance all I saw were farmers and workers off down the pub for a pint after a long day.

“I can’t see,” I was cut short in a panic, having spotted a polar bear bunny-hopping across my exhibits. There’s me, screaming down the mic, as was my friend. The bear grew ever more erratic until it finally hit us. My friend was the polar bear.

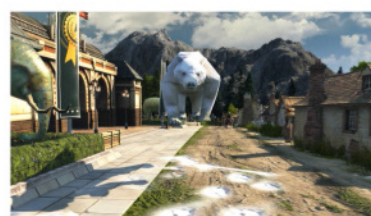
“Why do you get to be a polar bear, when I’m just a pleb?” I raged. I called for my partner to join us, only to discover that his first-person avatar was neither man nor bear. Instead, the devs in their infinite wisdom had decided player three would be a rowing boat.

For the rest of the evening, we paraded around the city. Man, bear and boat, shooting water jets from our eyes to celebrate this momentous event. All as the HMS Tube Worm’s crew chortled away to themselves, sails waving in the evening breeze. ■

## I WAS ABLE RUN AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT AND I COULD ALSO SHOOT JETS OF WATER



A menagerie worthy of the queen herself.



**LEFT:** Bunny-hopping bears.



**BELOW:** Plebs and boats and bears, oh my.





Dozens of songs have been added to various radio stations in Los Santos over the years.

## “There’s also a certain joy that comes from negotiating the twisty roads”

**GTA ONLINE**’s taxi mode is the dreary job I’d been waiting for

**T**axi work has arrived in *GTA Online*, and with it an invitation to cruise through a game world which has continued to evolve over the course of a decade. Where previous updates have brought new missions, business and automobiles, working for the Downtown Cab Co introduces simple, pacifist errands to the Los Santos of 2023, liberated from unskippable cutscenes and repetitive gunfights.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s completely banal. Once you’ve either purchased a taxi or arrived at the Downtown Cab Company, you can start taxi work at the press of a key. A customer’s blip will appear on the radar. Once you’ve collected them you’ll receive destination coordinates, while a tip value appears on screen which reduces the longer you take.

It’s precarious employment. Rolling your ride will knock a few dollars off your fare while committing a crime ends them altogether. And the dollar incentive

### KYLE HOEKSTRA



**THIS MONTH**  
Surrendered, once more, to pleasurable tedium.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Red Dead Online*, *Need for Speed Unbound*

for speedy transportation is frankly unnecessary when other players can be such bastards.

### ADMIRING LICENCE

I’ve decided that taxi work is safer based out of Paleto Bay, in the quieter north of San Andreas. After years away, I’m revisiting unusual spots, like the trails beside Zancudo River and lonely cottages swaddled in fog on the Pacific coastline.

The taxi mode also gives license to play the pared-back *GTA I* always

enjoyed: one focused on the pleasure of its physically responsive driving. For some reason it feels better in a piece of junk, even if the yellow cab doesn’t have the positively nautical handling of Roman’s clapped-out taxi in *GTA IV*. Transporting passengers is an invitation to take unusual paths, but there’s also a certain joy that comes from negotiating the twisty roads of Vinewood Hills with nary a scratch marring my yellow livery.

It’s anyone’s guess why it took a decade for such a mundane activity to find its way online, given it adds little that didn’t exist in the singleplayer when it launched on PC in 2014. But honestly, I’m glad there’s no management sim demanding my attention built around it.

Hopping in a cab and turning on the in-game radio is a chance to listen to the new music added to the game over the last few years, as well as the nostalgic tunes I enjoyed a decade ago. These pleasant diversions were all I ever sought when I first stepped into Rockstar’s counterfeit California. Driving taxis is my routine incentive to return to Los Santos. ■

**I’VE DECIDED THAT TAXI WORK IS SAFER BASED OUT OF PALETO BAY**



# WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

After a terrible launch the co-op online shooter is finding its feet. *By Robert Jones*

**S**hortly before last Christmas, after what I can only describe as a football-in-groin launch experience with *Darktide*, I wrote in PC Gamer issue 380 that I was “praying for death” after largely failing to play the game due to constant crashes and unfinished in-game systems. I finished that write-up hoping that “2023 sees *Darktide* evolve into the game we all want it to be”.

Fast forward over a quarter of a year, and *Darktide* has now had five update patches and some serious changes in strategy from developer Fatshark. After a backlash from players over the state of the game at launch, Fatshark issued an apology and announced it was recalibrating its roadmap for the game. The paid-for cosmetics were being put on a back-burner, as too the Xbox Series X/S launch, with game stability and upgrading its half-finished crafting system made a priority.

So, what's changed? Well, first off, I'm pleased to confirm that I've now not had a crash while playing *Darktide* for over a month, and this is despite running the game now with maximum Worker Threads on my CPU selected, something that was impossible for me and many other

## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2022

DEVELOPER  
Fatshark

PUBLISHER  
In-house

LINK  
[rb.gy/wwtwfo](http://rb.gy/wwtwfo)

PC gamers previously. Multiple patches dedicated to stability seem to have finally brought the game to a level where crashes are either non-existent or very rare.

Matchmaking also appears to be quicker and smoother than at launch, too, and there are more missions available at any one time on the Mission Board. Mission difficulty, side missions and conditions for victory have been tweaked, too.

## BUY THIS, REJECTS!

The biggest upgrade in terms of game systems comes in terms of the various vendors and systems available on *Darktide*'s Mourningstar lobby ship. To start, Fatshark has been as good as its word and upgraded the Shrine of the Omnissiah crafting station, with Hadron now allowing you to consecrate, refine, earn blessing, re-bless and combine blessings on items. The lack of options in terms of the crafting system in *Darktide* has been a big complaint after launch, so it's good to see gamers given more choice.

Elsewhere, the Armoury Exchange now has a new option called Brunt's Armoury, which allows gamers to buy any weapon, be that ranged or melee, at its lowest 'Profane sanctity' quality level. These weapons can then be upgraded at the Shrine of the Omnissiah like any other. It's a useful addition, as if

## MATCHMAKING ALSO APPEARS TO BE QUICKER AND SMOOTHER

you've got the resources and want to immediately acquire and spec out a certain weapon that you don't have then now you can, rather than waiting for a random drop.

The weekly contract-giving vendor on the Mourningstar player lobby, Sir Melk's Requisitionarium, has also been retooled in a recent patch, with each contract generally made quicker and easier to accomplish, while also increasing the reward given for completing each as well.

There's plenty of other changes, too, with a recent patch introducing notifications for Strike Team members in-game when they pick up Plasteel or Diamantine, as well as customisable Wargear Sets. The Wargear Sets let gamers save up to five load-outs for their character, at any one time, and then quickly swap between them depending on the mission. Useful and time saving.

Each successfully completed mission also now guarantees an Emperor's Gift reward, which scales in quality to mission difficulty, and Fatshark has upgraded the game's item generation system, too, meaning that rewards, perks and blessings now seem fairer and more in-keeping with the related weapon or curio.

The list of improvements go much further than what I've detailed here, but it's clear to me that Fatshark has got the game to the level that it should have been at launch. ■

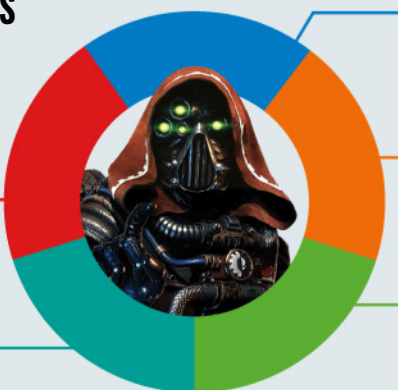
## BLESS THIS

*Hadron is Darktide's MVP, letting you...*

### CONSECRATE ITEM

Upgrade weapons and curios to a higher tier.

**REFINE ITEM**  
Change the perk on a weapon to another one.

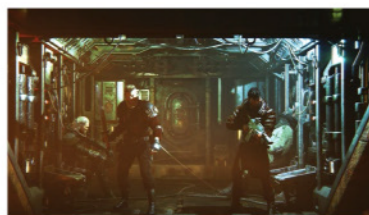
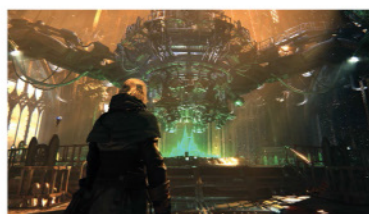
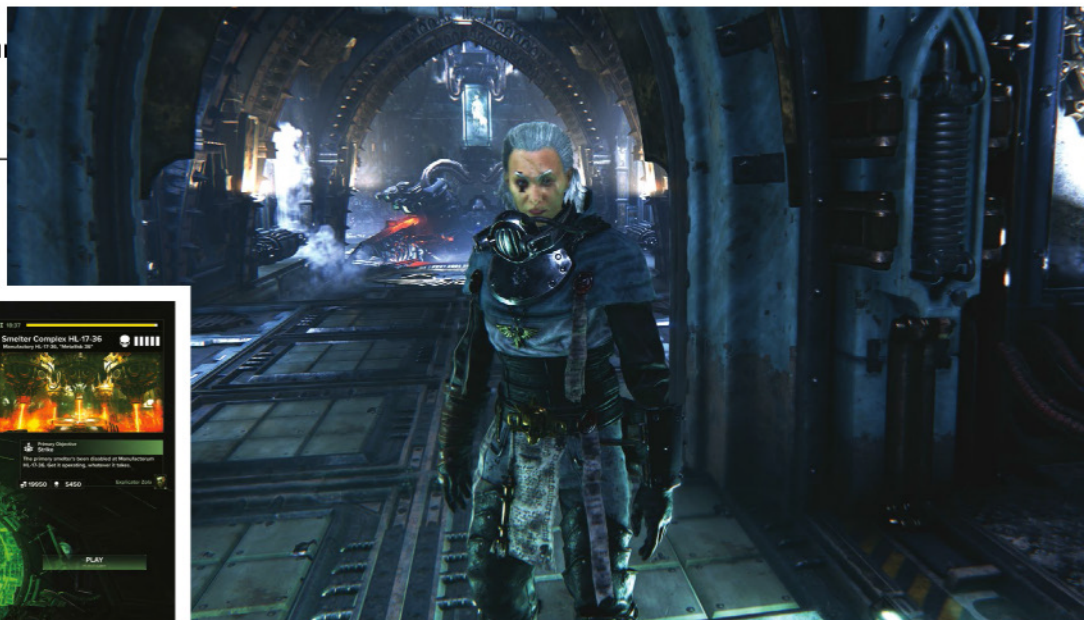


**EARN BLESSING**  
Extract a blessing from a weapon you don't use.

**RE-BLESS ITEM**  
Swap a blessing on a weapon for one that's been extracted.

**COMBINE BLESSINGS**  
Combine multiple blessings into one superior blessing.



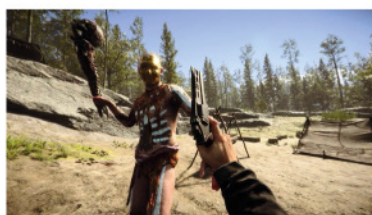


**ABOVE:** More missions are now available at any one time.

**FAR LEFT:** The Bolt Gun is pure explodey death for mutants.







**ABOVE:** Spawn a gun to deal with the biggest baddies.





# SONS OF THE FOREST

Mods make the game more fun. *By Christopher Livingston*



**BELOW:** Kelvin's big head mode isn't a mod, it's built right into the game.



**L**ike the zombies that often inhabit them, Early Access survival games are a genre that just won't die. No matter how many times players have been burned by buying a buggy, unfinished survival game, they keep coming back for more, from the early days of *DayZ* to the smash-hit dino-survival game *Ark: Survival Evolved* to 2021's Viking adventure, *Valheim*.

The latest success in the genre is *Sons of the Forest*, the sequel to 2014's *The Forest* – which also launched in Early Access and took four years to reach a full release in 2018. While it doesn't have zombies, technically, *Sons of the Forest* does have plenty of mutants and cannibals, and it also comes with a nice surprise. It's an Early Access game but it's not really all that buggy, and is nearly feature-complete, with a main story that can be finished and lots of enjoyable base-building, cannibal-battling features.

And *Sons of the Forest* is moddable, so creative modders have already found ways to improve and

## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
February 23, 2023

**DEVELOPER**  
Endnight Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Newnight

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/3JLKgh7](https://bit.ly/3JLKgh7)

add to it by unlocking a console for using cheats and other commands, letting players fly instead of walk, teleport instead of run, and maybe most usefully, enhance the game's sprawling inventory screen.

And Kelvin, the game's super helpful and endearing AI-controlled sidekick? There's great news if you



## MODS CAN HELP YOU ADD MULTIPLE KELVINS TO THE GAME

love him as much as I do. Mods can help you add multiple Kelvins to the game. You can't have too much of a good thing, right?

## COMMAND AND CONQUER

I don't know about you, but when it comes to survival I don't mind a bit of discreet cheating now and then. Maybe I've collected 24 logs and realise I need 25, and I just don't have the energy to race off into the woods and chop down yet another tree. Maybe I'm deep into a building when my stomach starts rumbling, and I don't want to stop just what I'm doing just to go fishing or stalk a deer through the woods. Convenience, from time to time, beats ethics over the head with a severed limb, and that's true in *Sons of the Forest*.

So if you want to make your survival life a bit easier, your first stop should be the *DebugConsole* mod you'll find at [thunderstore.io](https://thunderstore.io). There's another mod you'll need to install it, 

## PAL AROUND

*What makes Kelvin such a great sidekick?*

### 1 DOPEY

Maybe it's just the head trauma, but his dazed expression is charming.

### 2 FRIENDLY

His little head nod when you give him an order is adorable.



### 3 POSITIVE

He gives a thumbs-up after completing a task, even if he biffs it.

### 4 HELPFUL

The guy can catch a fish, even with his bare hands.

### 5 FUNNY

Thanks for building a fire, Kelvin. Too bad it's in the middle of a stream.



called *BepInExPack*, and you'll also need to install Thunderstore's mod manager, but unlike fighting off a pack of mutants in a dark underground superlab, it's a surprisingly painless prospect.

Once the *DebugConsole* mod is installed, you can open the developer console and enter codes. There are dozens of them and the console commands cover just about everything you could ask for, whether that's a few gentle, convenient cheats or to utterly bend the game to your will. You can spawn every single item and have them all appear instantly in your inventory, or if you're just after a few specific items, you can spawn them individually. Tired of fighting for your life every few minutes? You can switch on god mode so even the most persistent cannibals, brutes, ronnies and fingers won't give you a scratch. Or you can toggle their perception of you off and on, letting you move through the world like a ghost. You can even freeze them in place by switching off their AI altogether.

When it comes to Kelvin, your eager little helper, there are several cheats that can improve his life as well as your own. You can turn on god mode for Kelvin (and the other AI follower, Virginia) so you never have to worry about him dying. But while we're at it, why not duplicate Kelvin a few times? If one Kelvin is good, a whole squad of them is better, right? There's a console command to let you spawn additional Kelvins into your world, and they all work just the same as the original. Give them individual orders and watch them go to work, perhaps by clearing an entire section of the forest and adding all the lumber to the base you're building. I managed to spawn eight Kelvins in my world at once, and they made quick work of their tasks, but spawning more than that made the game's performance pretty choppy.

There are plenty of other standard console commands, like those that change the weather, set the time of day, regenerate your health, toggle the HUD off for better picture-taking, and cycling through the seasons. But there are some silly ones, too, like a code that lets you run through the world at high speeds like *The Flash*, and one that lets you super jump like... well, off the top of my head I can't think of a superhero who just jumps around. Mario? Let's say

Mario. There's also a cheat that lets you turn on instabuild, so you can select the structure from your building guide, place it on the ground, and bingo, it's fully complete. No tree-chopping needed.

## FAST TRAVEL

One thing I can't seem to find a way to do with console commands is fly, which is typically a pretty standard open world game cheat. That's probably why there's a separate mod for it, called *Flight*, which lets you tap the J key to begin hovering and tap it again to turn it off. It even allows you to customise which hotkey you'd like to bind it to, and even how fast or slow you'd like to fly. Not much need for your GPS to find a point of interest: just take off and have a bird's eye view of the world.

Speaking of getting around quickly, another mod called *TeleportToCursor* lets you simply point your eyes to where you'd like to be, then press Shift and click the left mouse button (while unarmed). You'll instantly appear where you were looking, making it an easy way to scale a cliff or just get yourself across the map quickly. Another fun travel-based mod is *InfiniteZipline*. It removes restrictions on how long your ziplines can be, letting you build long single-line transit systems from one end of the map to the other. You can change the acceleration and

velocity to scale with the zipline, too, so if it's really, really long, you'll zip really, really fast.

## STARTING OUT

Not everyone is looking for megacheats when they play *Sons of the Forest*, however. But sometimes you still need a little help. Your starting position in a new game



## FREEZE THEM IN PLACE BY SWITCHING OFF THEIR AI

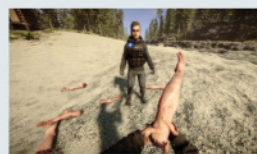
seems to be random, but if there's a specific crash site you'd like to begin your game at, the *Crash Site Selector* mod will let you choose the one you want. Another mod to start a new game with is called *A Good Start*, which begins your new adventure at the side of a lake, with over 200 logs in a storage unit and a treehouse stocked with supplies.

And no single feature of *Sons of the Forest* has gotten as much attention from modders as the game's inventory. And it really needs it. Unlike most games, your inventory is spread out on the ground in front of you, and just to see it all you need to really look around by moving your mouse to all edges of the screen, which makes quickly finding the item you need a bit of a hassle. *Faster Inventory Panning* makes this process much quicker, allowing you to adjust the panning speed, cursor speed, and even the inventory FOV so you can fit more of it onto your screen.

And if you're looking for a fun touch when it comes to inventory mods, here's something more your style. A mod called *Inventory Editor*, which lets you make changes to your inventory by opening your save file and doing some tweaking. It opens a compact little window that displays the current amount of each item in your inventory, with a column to enter the desired amount you'd like. Go ahead, chuck a few extra blueberries into your pack, and maybe a few additional skulls. No one's watching. It even has a feature that backs up your original save file, just in case you break something by adding too many severed arms. Now that's very considerate. ■

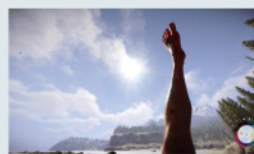
## CHOP CHOP

Everything fun you can do with body parts



### ARMS

Not just for waving any more. You can use arms as a club. "Beat them to death with the wet end."



### LEGS

Humiliate your enemy by hacking off his leg and eating it while he's still alive to watch.



### HEADS

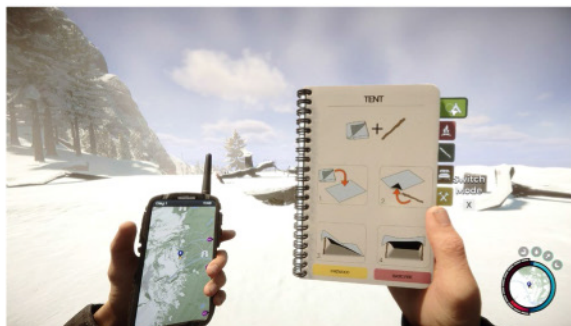
Hold it up and shake it: it might scare the next cannibal away. Maybe.



### SKULLS

Decorate fences and poles, and even turn one into a lamp. How cosy!





**ABOVE:** Many hands make light work.

**FAR LEFT:** The inventory screen gets the most attention from modders.

**LEFT:** Tired of mutant babies? Turn on invulnerability.







# SURVIVE THE RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE

Take a murderous stroll through Spanish countryside. *By Sean Martin*

## NEED TO KNOW

**DIFFICULTY**  
Normal

**TIME**  
20 hours

### VITAL LINKS

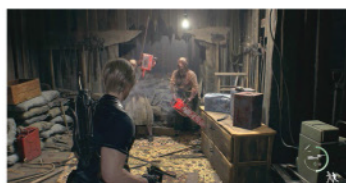
The best guns:  
[bit.ly/3JtCBRx](https://bit.ly/3JtCBRx)

All Clockwork Castellan  
locations:  
[bit.ly/42N5vGZ](https://bit.ly/42N5vGZ)



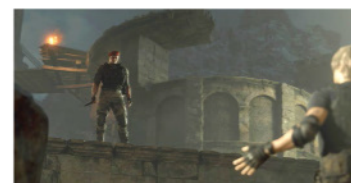
## SAVE YOUR BULLETS

**1** While blazing away at every villager in sight might kill them quick, saving ammo is vital if you want to survive – especially on higher difficulties. Try shooting enemies in the face or kneecap to open them up to a kick that can help you make space.



## PERFECT PARRY

**2** One of the new combat changes in the remake is that you can use your knife to parry close-range weapon attacks, or even thrown weapons. A perfect parry offers you the opportunity to melee an enemy, knocking them down for some free damage.



## MAN AND KNIFE

**3** Stabbing and parrying enemies reduces the condition of your blade, so upgrade its durability, and repair it with the merchant. If you shoot all of the Clockwork Castellan statues, you'll unlock the Primal Knife, which you can upgrade to be unbreakable.



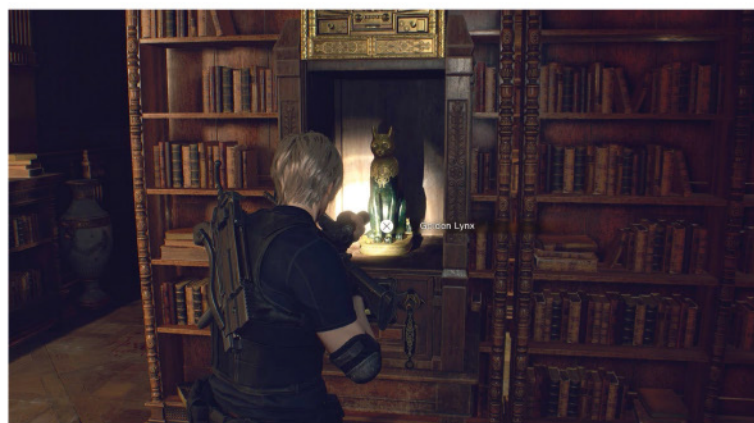
## GOOD 'GRADES

**4** You won't have enough cash to upgrade all your guns, but prioritise those you use most, especially your handgun. In the latter half of the game you'll be able to buy an Exclusive Upgrade Ticket from the merchant that gives you access to a powerful weapon trait.



## SPINEL TO WIN

**5** You get Spinel by completing blue requests found on posters around the map, ranging from shooting rats, to finding a gold egg in a chicken enclosure off to the side of the lake. These Spinel can be traded to the merchant for items, treasure and more.



## TREASURABLE

**6** For the most part you'll buy upgrades with cash you get by pawning treasures found throughout the map. These can be looted from locked drawers, wayshrines in the village and square lock boxes in the castle. Boost their value further by inseting gems.

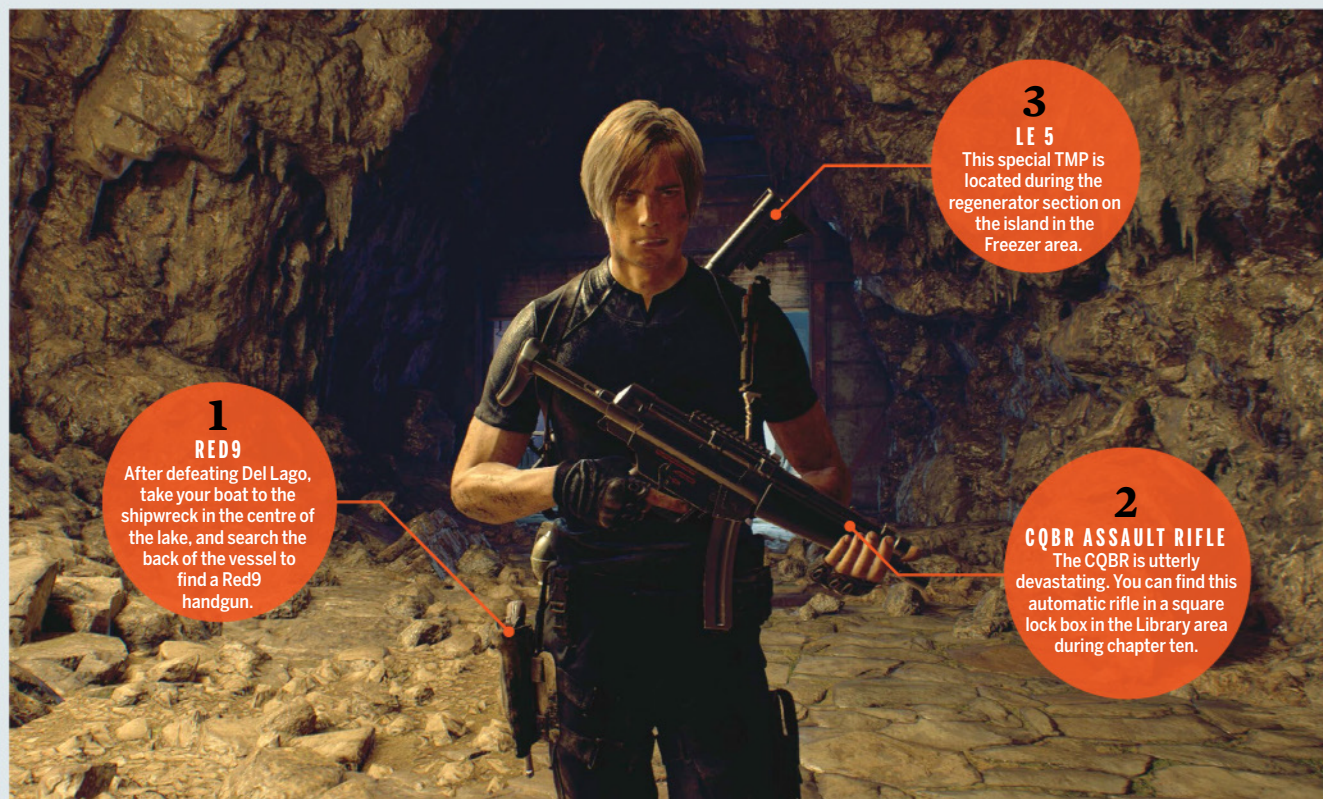


## CRAFTY COWBOY

**7** The remake introduces a new crafting system to create ammo. This occasionally gives you some bonus bullets, and you can increase that chance of that happening by equipping charms that boost craft bonus frequency, such as Doctor Salvador for rifle ammo.



## SECRET WEAPONS *Load up on guns*



**1**  
**RED9**

After defeating Del Lago, take your boat to the shipwreck in the centre of the lake, and search the back of the vessel to find a Red9 handgun.

**3**  
**LE 5**

This special TMP is located during the regenerator section on the island in the Freezer area.

**2**

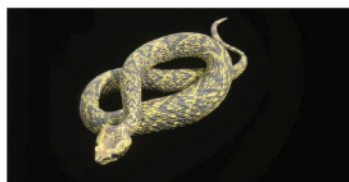
**CQBR ASSAULT RIFLE**

The CQBR is utterly devastating. You can find this automatic rifle in a square lock box in the Library area during chapter ten.



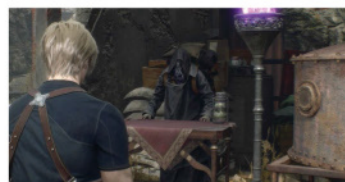
### CHARMED

**8** You earn charms to equip to your attache case at the shooting range that opens up in chapter three, and they confer a variety of bonuses. The Ashley charm, for example, buffs the health recovery you get from green herbs, while Luis Sera increases ammo resale value.



### TASTY EATS

**9** If you find yourself running low on health, remember that you can eat fish, eggs, or even vipers that you collect out in the world. Charms such as the Black Bass, Chicken, or Isabel boost the amount healed by each of these respective items.



### ROCKET MAN

**10** Finding a boss or enemy too hard? If you've got the cash you can purchase a rocket launcher from the merchant. This single-use weapon is a one-hit kill for bosses, or will at least push them into their second phase, so make sure that's when you use it.



### BODY SAVE

**11** The next most important upgrade is body armour. You can purchase this in chapter eight in the castle, and it'll mitigate damage dealt against you until it breaks, when you'll need to fix it. If you manage to get the Ada Wong charm, you can reduce that cost by 30%.



### ALL GUNS MUST GO

**12** Take advantage of the discounts that the merchant gives and make sure to grab the free secret guns you can get. These weapons are some of the most powerful in the game and free up your cash for more pressing purchases.





# PREY BY PROXY

## PART III

One man's attempt to play  
Prey without directly killing  
anything concludes.

*By Rick Lane*



**O**ver the last three months, I've been chipping away at *Prey*, with the added twist that I'm not allowed to kill anything directly. I've been broadly successful thus far, using traps, environmental hazards and remote equipment like turrets to Wile E Coyote my way through the beleaguered space station Talos 1. But now I'm faced with the ultimate test, my personal Road Runner. Down in the station's reactor room, I narrowly avoided being squished by the Nightmare, the biggest, toughest and nastiest member of the hostile alien race known as the Typhon, and in a fit of rage-induced stupidity, I vowed to exact revenge on it.

This will be tricky, given how I originally swore a vow of – if not quite pacifism, then diminished responsibility. My tactics work well enough for basic enemies like Mimics and Phantoms. But even taking down a moderately tough enemy like a Telepath is very challenging when you can't just shoot it out of the air. I doubt whether it's possible to kill the Nightmare without using shotguns or aggressive psychic powers like Psychoshock.

Nonetheless, I swore a vow, and it would be dishonourable (and boring) of me to not at least try. But I'm not going to track down the Nightmare just yet. Partly because I want to prepare for the ensuing battle, and partly because I have a few loose ends to tie up. But more than anything else, I literally can't track it down. The Nightmare's appearance is as random as it is unwelcome, and getting it to turn up more predictably involves pursuing a sidequest, which is my immediate objective.

The first step on this journey necessitates a return trip to Hardware Labs. I'm not thrilled about having to retrace my steps, but it does provide an opportunity to test some new abilities I've unlocked. The first is Lift Field, which creates a psychic updraft that traps enemies in the air, and has further use as a deployable elevator. The second is Phantom Genesis, a brilliant power that transforms human corpses into Phantoms that fight by your side.

It quickly becomes apparent that I should have unlocked this latter power long ago. Phantom Genesis makes dealing with regular enemies significantly easier, and is far less hassle than lugging a turret everywhere I

go. It has several upgrade tiers too, so if I'm going to fight the Nightmare, I want this ability as primed as possible.

My second journey through Hardware Labs is relatively straightforward, and I nab the communication device I need from a satellite stored on the engineering floor. I now need to take this into space and install it into another, orbiting satellite, which will then enable me to summon and also dismiss the Nightmare at will.

I could exit the station via the Hardware Labs airlock, but the Arboretum airlock is generally a safer place to launch, as it's far removed from the main body of the station. Besides, I have unfinished business up there. I

## THE NIGHTMARE'S APPEARANCE IS AS RANDOM AS IT IS UNWELCOME

need to retrieve the second arming key – which I'll use to destroy the station – from my brother Alex. But first, I have a date with a murderer.

If you read last month's entry, you'll know that I very cleverly solved the mystery of *Prey*'s imposter cook, and was not completely and utterly fooled by the grizzled and vaguely threatening Ukrainian man masquerading as the ship's cook, Will Mitchell, while he murders what's left of the crew. Ahem. But in the interim, I've improved my sleuthing via the upgrade path of Actually Paying Attention. I've discovered that the impostor's real name is Luca Golubkin, and he's a 'Volunteer', which is TranStar code for 'Unwanted criminal transported to Talos 1 for highly unethical scientific testing'. I've also tracked Luca to somewhere in the station's Bridge, which is accessible through the Arboretum.

## LAST COURSE

I take the main elevator up the Arboretum, and cross the station's artificial garden before descending via grav-shaft to the Bridge. I haven't been to the bridge before, so it's overrun with Typhon. But with the aid of an etheric phantom I summon from the body of crew member Matt

Cothrin, I clear the way to the escape pods, where Golubkin is holed up. In fact, he's sat inside one of the escape pods. He seems injured, and beckons me to enter the pod, reasoning that we can escape the station together right then and there.

Obviously, I don't trust him. But I want to know why he killed my fellow crewmates, and furthermore, why he's been blathering disturbing nonsense over the radio at me. Also, I can't kill him, at least not with my own hands. So I might as well see where this leads. I step into the pod, hoping it'll activate some additional dialogue. Instead, the imposter cook starts laughing maniacally, and it's only then I notice the primed recycler charge attached to the wall.

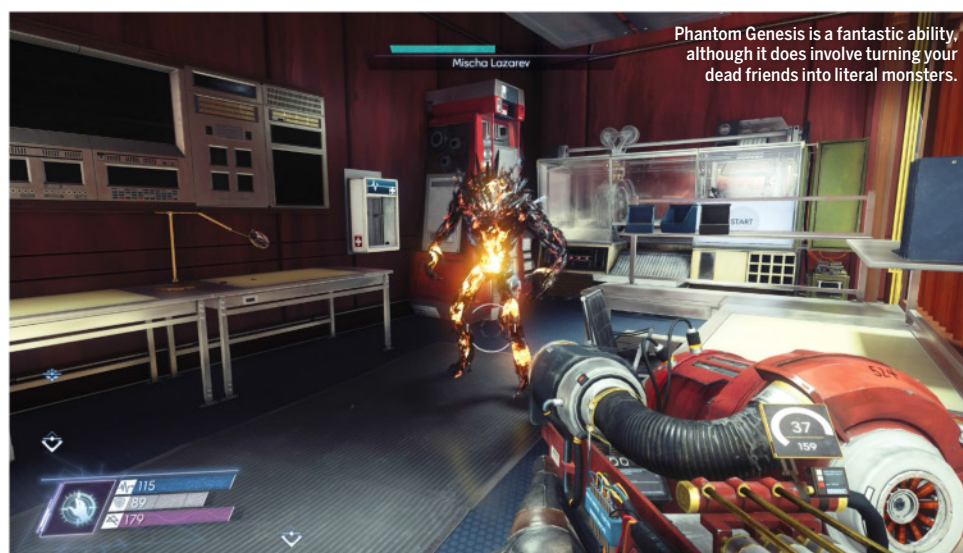
A quick reminder. Recycler charges automatically sort and

## THE RULES

1. Play *Prey* with indirect kills only.

2. Traumas and weapon degradation on.

3. No reloading except upon death.





» compress environmental objects into basic forms of matter, essentially an entire recycling centre condensed into grenade form. I use them all the time, mainly as traps to indirectly eliminate Typhon. It's precisely because I use them all the time that I installed a suit modification that renders me immune to the effects of recycler charges. Hence, the net effect of the imposter cook's trap is that he gets crushed into three or four marble-sized balls of matter, while I stand there wondering what the hell this was all about. Hey, at least I didn't have to break any rules to get rid of him.

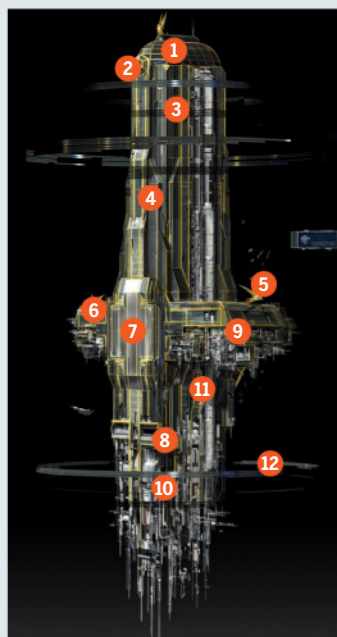
### EXECUTIVE OVERREACH

With the imposter cook dead by his own malicious hand, I turn my attention to my next bit of unfinished business – Alex. After I foiled his attempt to stop me moving about Talos 1 by restarting the station's reactor, Alex resolved to no longer interfere with my plans to blow the station up. I head up to his office in the Arboretum to retrieve his arming key. But typically, he isn't there. Instead, he calls me over radio to make one final request. If I head out into space and scan some Typhon material for him, Alex reckons he can eliminate the Typhon without having to destroy the station.

Alex won't hand over the arming key until I do this, so I've no choice but to humour him. At least I can go find that satellite while I'm at it. That's my initial plan, anyway. Unfortunately, scanning the Typhon material requires me to navigate a

## MAP

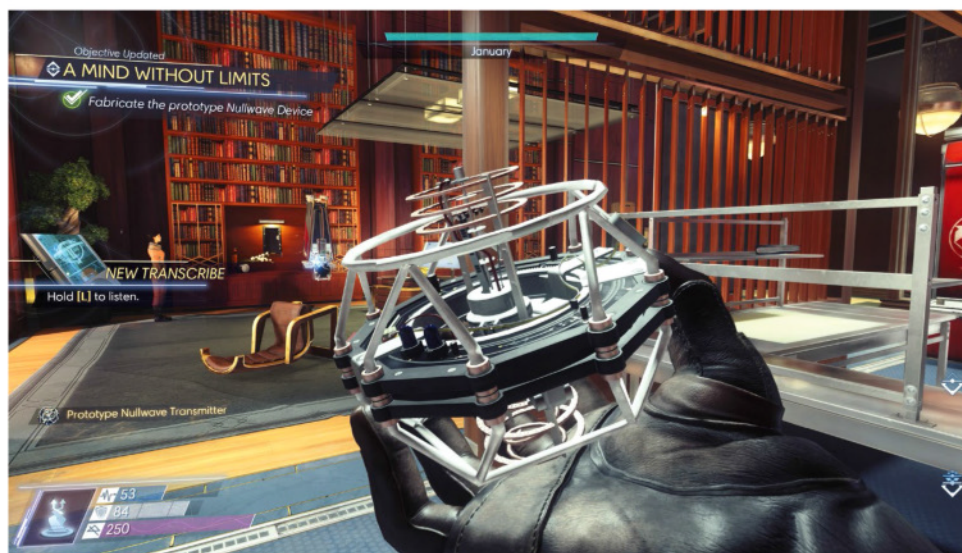
*There's a lot of moving about Talos 1 in this entry. So here's a map to help you*



- |                 |                    |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1 Arboretum     | 7 Lobby            |
| 2 Bridge        | 8 Life support     |
| 3 Crew quarters | 9 Hardware labs    |
| 4 Guts          | 10 Powersource     |
| 5 Shuttle bay*  | 11 Psycho-tronics* |
| 6 Neuromods     | 12 Cargo bay       |

\*Rear of station

**BELOW:** Alex's plan for eliminating the Typhon rests on this little gizmo.



particularly dangerous area of the station exterior, and since most of my indirect combat tactics are mitigated in space, I end up getting badly hurt, and have to return inside the station immediately after scanning the Typhon so I can find a medical operator (briefcase-sized robots that hover around the station).

When I re-embark Talos 1, I discover that I can't use any medical operators. TranStar, the company that owns Talos 1, has grown tired of Alex's ineffectual attempt to contain the Typhon outbreak, and has dispatched its private military forces to clean up the mess. This means two things. The station is now stalked by a psychopathic killer named Dahl, and instead of spawning friendly medical robots, all the operator stations now spew out hostile military drones equipped with lasers.

The good news is, dealing with these drones is fairly straightforward. Not only do I have Phantom Genesis on my side, I also have enough Neuromods to unlock Machine Mind, which temporarily turns aggressive mechanical objects to my side. I can also hack disabled operators to fight by my side permanently, which means that Dahl has essentially handed me a small robot army to hunt him down with.

Yes, my new goal is to eliminate Dahl. This means finding a way into his shuttle, which is docked in the shuttle bay attached to the main lobby. Not only is the shuttle bay a much larger area than I expect, with multiple departments all connected to a cathedral-like hangar, but also, when I find a way into the shuttle itself, Dahl isn't there. Instead, he's down in the life support section of the station, busy sabotaging the air circulation to suffocate all the crew holding out in the Cargo Bay.

I've only a few minutes to get to Dahl and fix whatever he's broken before what remains of Talos 1's crew chokes on carbon dioxide. I leap from the door of the shuttle, using my propulsion jets to glide across to the bay's exit. I emerge into the security corridor connecting the shuttle bay to Talos 1's main lobby. And that's when the Nightmare turns up.

### NIGHTMARE REAPER

For the record, my plan was to pack the main lobby with turrets and friendly phantoms, then use the communication device to summon





## I SELECT THE MINDJACK POWER AND TEMPORARILY MOLLIFY THE CREATURE

the Nightmare to a neatly organised ambush. But I got distracted from going to the satellite by \*gestures wildly\* and now I'm trapped in a corridor the Nightmare can barely fit into, with no plan and a countdown timer ticking in the background.

Before the Nightmare can vaporise me with one of its deadly telekinetic blasts, I quickly select the Mindjack power and temporarily mollify the creature. Mindjack only lasts a few seconds on the Nightmare, but that's long enough for me to repair a nearby turret and fortify it so that it can withstand at least a couple of the Nightmare's attacks. I then try to crawl underneath the Nightmare, but there isn't enough space, and as the Mindjack wears off the creature stomps me and almost kills me outright. So I Mindjack it again, and this time manage to squeeze around the side of the creature. I then use Phantom Genesis, which I recently upgraded so that it spawns more powerful elemental phantoms. In this case, it's a Thermal Phantom, aka one that uses fire attacks.

This is a significant stroke of luck, as fire attacks continue to burn over

time. This means I can repeatedly Mindjack the Nightmare while the Thermal Phantom's attacks gradually burn it to death. When the fourth Mindjack wears off, the Nightmare actually tries to run away, but the Thermal Phantom intercepts it as it retreats up the lobby stairs, and the Nightmare dies with a whimper.

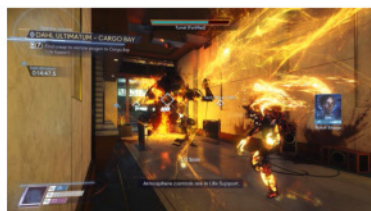
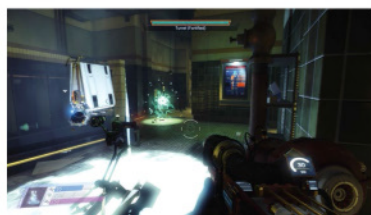
I did it. I killed the Nightmare without laying a finger on it, and it wasn't even that difficult. But I don't have time to be impressed with myself. The clock's ticking. I race to the main elevator and descend to life support. Dahl has barricaded himself inside the atmosphere regulation room. But dealing with him is easy after fighting the nightmare. I hack the door, Mindjack Dahl before he can respond, then zap him with my disrupter stun gun, knocking him unconscious.

From this point onward, we're into the game's final

run, the major story choices, and the various endings. But I'll leave those for you to discover. From a practical perspective, defeating the Nightmare without directly fighting it was the climax of this playthrough. I wanted to force myself to explore *Prey*'s potential for emergent play, to avoid relying on guns and bullets to propel myself through the game. Overall, I think I did that reasonably well. But I also believe there are further novel ways to navigate Talos 1 and the challenges it provides. Consider this diary a blueprint for getting more out of *Prey*, and see what you can add to fully explore Arkane's most uncompromising immersive sim. ■

**ABOVE:** It took my brain a stupidly long time to figure out how the perspective worked here.

**BOTTOM:** The final showdown.







WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

# INNOCUOUS SETTINGS IN HORROR GAMES

Ordinary places made extraordinarily scary. *By Jody Macgregor*



LEFT: Do you serve foggaccino?





**S**ome horror games are set in spooky castles, abandoned mental asylums, derelict spaceships, or circuses with an unwise hiring policy regarding murderclowns. Others are set in suburban streets, shopping malls, hospitals, schools, or homes. I find the second kind have the most impact, haunting my thoughts long after they're over like a picture I shouldn't have looked at on the internet.

The *Silent Hill* games are especially good at this, and have made me feel even more ambivalent about hospitals than I already did. Hospitals are already stressful places, but *Silent Hill 2* takes in apartment buildings, a nightclub, a historical society and even a bowling alley, all of which it imbues with terror. A brief scene in a cemetery turns out to be a rare moment of safety. Though eventually *Silent Hill 2* descends into a dark prison, its horrifying finale is saved for a holiday resort on a lake.

The scariest things in *Silent Hill 2* are accentuated by the ordinariness of their backdrop. We anticipate creepy stuff in gothic mansions, that's the whole point of them, but the worst thing you expect to encounter in a bowling alley is a 7-10 split. *Silent Hill* takes innocuous places and peels their skin back until the walls bleed with rust and the floors flake away to reveal fragile chainlink over bottomless pits.

### WHAT THE CHUCK

There's a risk with this approach. If players aren't familiar enough with a place, it won't have that element of recognition. I wasn't frightened by the animatronic mascots in *Five Nights At Freddy's* not because I'm so very brave, but because I didn't grow up in a country where fast food restaurants have mechanical hosts. There's no Chuck E Cheese in

## GHOUL SCHOOLS

*Schools even scarier than real ones*



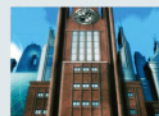
### YEONDU HIGH WHITE DAY

A Labyrinth Named School was a political prison camp then a wartime hospital before becoming an educational facility. No wonder it's full of ghosts, though that doesn't explain the killer janitor. Or the Beachwear Costume DLC packs that put its cast of schoolgirls into bikinis.



### GREENWOOD HIGH DETENTION

Haunted by history, only that history is happening now. It's set in 1960s Taiwan, which means the country's under martial law and you can get arrested for being in the wrong book club. The fact *Detention* makes ghosts who kill you if you don't hold your breath scarier than that is a triumph.



### HOPE'S PEAK ACADEMY DANGANRONPA

Trigger Happy Havoc lacks ghosts, but does have a cartoon bear who traps the students inside and forces them to kill each other for a chance to escape. An elite school reserved for the best of the best, the real horror of Hope's Peak Academy is the inequality of private education.

Australia – they tried in the 1980s under the name Charlie's Cheese because 'chuck' means vomit there – but even with the name changed it didn't catch on.

More often than not it's an effective technique, though. The most frightening places in *Vampire: The*

Meanwhile, *Bloodlines* makes you a vampire with superpowers. You expect to have nothing to fear from an empty hotel, even if it's haunted. But when you get there the well-paced scares combine with the mechanical worry of your blood meter slowly emptying when there's nobody around to feed on to create a moment of traditional horror.

### ALIENATION STATION

That's not to say more obvious locations don't have their place. The Shalebridge Cradle in *Thief: Deadly Shadows* is a perfect example: a mental asylum that is also a haunted orphanage, one cliché draped on another like a sheet over a corpse. It still manages to be memorable through a combination of claustrophobia, excellent enemy design, and a command of light and darkness that benefits it both as a stealth game and an engine designed to freeze your blood solid.

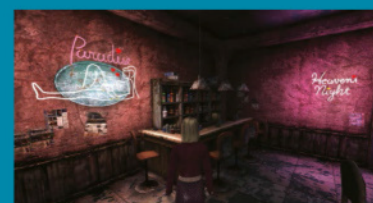
Yet even in more typical horror settings, a dose of normality helps. The grisly spaceship Ishimura from *Dead Space* is frightening at first, but a few hours in I learnt to expect necromorphs bursting from its blood-soaked vents. Though Sevastopol Station from *Alien: Isolation* was also floating helplessly in space and an alien was just as likely to slither out of the ceiling in a hall full of graffiti, it never stopped being scary. Its rooms were rather less full of corpses and rust, often well-lit and containing desks, old computers and executive toys. It felt like an office for a paper supply company, all square edges, accentuating the sleek alien.

They say familiarity breeds contempt, but in horror contempt is useful. Familiar locations trick us into thinking we know what to expect, and there's power in yanking those expectations out from under our feet to reveal the thin chains separating us from the abyss. ■

## EVEN IN MORE TYPICAL HORROR SETTINGS, A DOSE OF NORMALITY HELPS

*Masquerade – Bloodlines* and *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* are hotels that lull you into a false sense of security. In *Dark Corners* you can lock both doors of your hotel room, but nothing will stop the locals from knocking those doors down to kill you, forcing you into a rooftop escape that culminates in the most frightening thing in videogames: precise first-person jumping.

RIGHT: Nothing bad could occur near a desk this normal.







REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



All truly great pieces of art  
stem from ambition





The water effects in *Outcast* were breathtaking in 1999.

# OUTCAST

A cinematic action adventure that reaches for the stars. *By Robert Jones*

**S**tep with me my friend back to the [checks official PC Gamer 2023 calendar] now very distant past of 1999. Stepping out of our time machine we now exist in a PC gaming world where beige PC tower rigs rule the roost, 3dfx Voodoo graphics cards are still a thing, and *Team Fortress Classic* is being played over LAN in PC Gamer Towers. Oh, and *Outcast* is hitting store shelves in all its big-box PC glory.

And, despite sales that will go on to be described, at best, as modest; and the fact that its maker Appeal will go on to bankruptcy within two years of its release, *Outcast* is about to change the scope and vision of videogames as a medium forever. All truly great pieces of art stem from

ambition. That desire to push the boundaries of what is considered possible, and with its stunning (for the time) voxel graphics engine, expansive scope, professional musical score and complex in-game mechanics, *Outcast* remains even to this day one of the most visionary and ambitious games of all time.

## ALIEN TECHNOLOGY

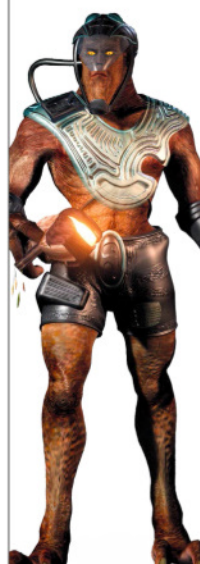
*Outcast's* story of a group of humans transported to a parallel universe and becoming involved in a time-warping adventure over multiple worlds, encountering numerous alien species, and having to defeat a big bad in order to save the Earth was nothing new in 1999, but the fact that *Outcast* truly reached for the stars in how it did so absolutely was.

With six large and vastly different alien worlds to visit during the course of the game, and for each of those

lands to stretch out before your eyes to incredible distances, powered by the game's unique 'voxel engine', was – and you'll have to trust me here, as a guy who played *Outcast* back in 1999 on his own beige tower rig – truly mind blowing.

Oh, and did I mention the water and portal effects? At the time these were graphics that truly felt like they were from an alien world, and one that existed in our future, too. It was like Appeal had itself managed to travel into the future of videogames and return armed with abilities far beyond any other dev in 1999.

It wasn't just the graphics that felt game-changing, either. *Outcast* came with a full musical score courtesy of the Moscow Symphony Orchestra, which matched the game's graphical vision in terms of scope and quality. Today, in 2023, games with their own big-budget musical scores are quite common and nothing to write home about, but back in 1999 it was unheard of. ➤



## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
1999

DEVELOPER  
Appeal

PUBLISHER  
Infogrames

LINK  
[bit.ly/3Fa10Rj](https://bit.ly/3Fa10Rj)





Not all worlds are this idyllic, with threats common.

Wrap this together with a game that featured hundreds of NPCs, many of which featured full, well-delivered voice acting, third-person and first-person gameplay modes, context-sensitive reactions by NPCs based on what the player does, numerous cinematically shot cutscenes, a variety of weapons to acquire and upgrade, and even wild, Tauntaun-like beasts called Twon-ha to tame and ride, and the ambition and complex vision of *Outcast* becomes incredibly evident.

### OFFBEAT SYMPHONY

The thing is, though, replaying *Outcast* again in 2023 courtesy of GOG's much-needed 2010 re-release (the game was basically unplayable on most gaming systems a decade after its release, so GOG's release essentially made it possible for most PC gamers to play it again, or for the first time), it's obvious that in reaching for the stars it stumbles here and there when it comes round to delivering a great videogame.

There's no doubting that the start of the game will be very off-putting

## MAP-AZAAR

*A tourist guide to the six worlds of Outcast*

### 1 SHAMAZAAR

A tropical world filled with temples, palm trees and pools of water.

### 2 TALANZAAR

A world that features the city of Okriana, location of the Palace Fae.

### 3 OKAAR

A forested region filled with various ancient structures.



### 4 MOTAZAAR

A barren, volcanic world filled with lava and geysers.

### 5 OKASANKAAR

A water-filled, marshy world dominated by the city of Cyana.

### 6 RANZAAR

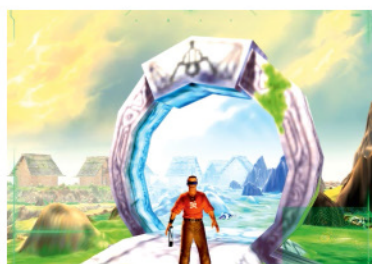
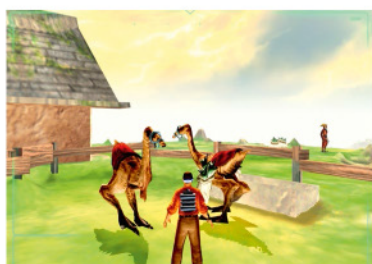
A world of snow and ice and home to the Dolotai guardians.

to many gamers, with what can only be described as a humongous info-bomb of phrases, lore, character names, mechanics and locations dropped on the player. By modern videogame standards there is very little hand-holding or signposting, either, so you really do have to soldier on through the first few hours of *Outcast* to feel at home in its world.

Cutter Slade, the protagonist hero of *Outcast*, an ex-US Special Forces badass sent to the parallel universe to save now stranded scientists, also handles clunkily, despite a moveset that includes running, jumping, swimming and crawling. Generally this doesn't get in the way of enjoyment, but during the game's rare stealth or platforming sections gamers will no-doubt end up cursing the game for undeserved failures.

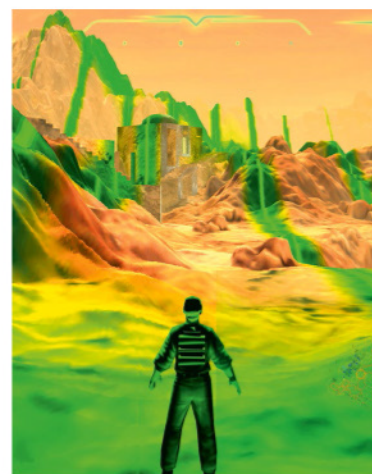
The structure of the game will also likely appeal – see what I did there! – or rub gamers up the wrong way depending on how linear they like their gaming experiences. *Outcast* has a largely non-linear structure, allowing players to explore and discover areas, NPCs and quests





**LEFT:** Twon-ha can be bought or tamed, and then ridden.

**RIGHT:** Portals link the various worlds in *Outcast*.



in whatever way they want to. However, discovering these things requires non-signposted, slowburn adventuring, as well as the listening to NPC dialogue, so if you prefer go-there-do-this quest markers and short mission times then *Outcast* will likely feel at odds with you.

Combat, too, while far from terrible and perfectly acceptable still in 2023, lacks a tightness and punch of more modern action adventures. Typical combat encounters involve quite slowly strafing left and right while firing your weapon at distant alien foes (there's no cover mechanics or dodge manoeuvres), and it very rarely gets more exciting or dynamic than that. While 1999's most exciting and dynamic games in terms of combat, *Quake 3 Arena* and *Unreal Tournament*, had not been released when *Outcast* hit store shelves, the fact is that its combat mechanics were far from best in class then, so now they really do feel dated.

The same was true as well back in 1999 in terms of the game's movement mechanics, with Cutter coming off second best to Lara Croft, who was backflipping, running and rolling while firing dual pistols a year earlier in *Tomb Raider III*. It's not as if Slade handles particularly badly, it's

## BY MODERN VIDEOGAME STANDARDS THERE IS VERY LITTLE HAND-HOLDING

just that in the grand scope of this game, the movement in combat just feels a notch or two off where it should be. And while the ability to go prone and crawl commando-style feels accurate for an ex-US Special Forces badass, the lack of other dynamic movement, especially in combat, does not.

### A FLAWED MASTERPIECE

What emerges then playing *Outcast* again today is a feeling of a game that was genuinely pushing at the outer rim of gaming, it was reaching for the unknown, and as ever with that process, not everything ends in success. So many of its traits, features and mechanics are now incredibly evident in modern games, and many have become the accepted norm.

For example, the way large parts of the game are shot cinematically, both in and out of cutscenes, is incredibly reminiscent of, say, *Mass Effect*, while its reactive context-sensitive system for NPCs and their

factions can still be seen in games like *Cyberpunk 2077*. Meanwhile, *Outcast's* mix of combat, exploration and item collection evokes more recent open world games like *Assassin's Creed*, and its multi-world structure echoed to a degree in games like *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. And that's saying nothing of the heavily narrated storytelling that you can find in later games stretching from *Dragon Age* to *A Plague Tale*.

But back in 1999, just as *Outcast* reached into the unknown with its voxel engine and delivered a stunning but difficult to process (literally, as the engine did not use a system's graphics card at all, and instead loaded everything on to its CPU and RAM) experience visually, it did so with a pioneering rawness that extended to most aspects of its design, and not all of those hit home or, like the voxel engine, endured.

In PC Gamer's original review of *Outcast* back in August 1999, we concluded that, "*Outcast* is undoubtedly a masterpiece; the trouble is that it may never be recognised as one." In 2023, though, *Outcast's* recognition and legacy is beyond doubt. A flawed masterpiece who's influence stretched far beyond its own commercial success. ■





## FRASER BROWN



You crave adventure. A mystery. A dead body in a locked room. You weirdo. But I won't judge. Instead, here are some puzzling adventure games to keep your lust for conundrums sated.



## PENTIMENT

[obsidian.net](http://obsidian.net)

→ Monks, murder and calligraphy – Obsidian's *Pentiment* has it all. A mystery spanning decades, this is an elaborate yarn full of lies and hidden motivations, bolstered by great art where even the fonts tell a story. And you can brush up on your history while solving these crimes.



## THE EXCAVATION OF HOB'S BARROW

[cadgames.weebly.com](http://cadgames.weebly.com)

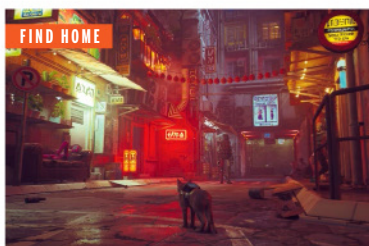
→ Few point-and-clicks can boast *Hob's Barrow's* subtle menace, slowly building up as you explore a village and chat up its inhabitants, all in the name of adventure. It's an understated slow burn, but at all times gripping. You'll want to solve this mystery even if it kills you.



## TECHNOBABYLON

[wadjeteyegames.com](http://wadjeteyegames.com)

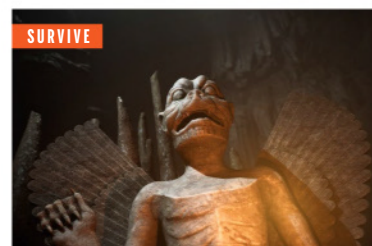
→ A cyberpunk conspiracy romp tangled up in a smart police procedural, *Technobabylon* is still one of the most compelling outings in this subgenre. The world and characters are really what it's about, but there are also some puzzles that take full advantage of the setting.



## STRAY

[stray.game](http://stray.game)

→ Explore the post-apocalypse through the eyes of a lost cat and try to find your way home. *Stray's* simple puzzles and straightforward tale make it a relaxing, if sometimes melancholy, romp through cities and ruins, elevated by the way it does make you feel like a feline explorer.



## HOUSE OF ASHES

[thedarkpictures.com](http://thedarkpictures.com)

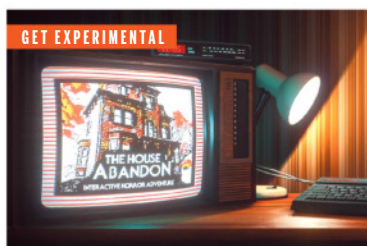
→ This entry in *The Dark Pictures Anthology* is the series at its most intense, putting you in control of Iraqi and US troops during the Iraq War, who now find themselves in a Sumerian ruin. It goes to some weird places and contains the anthology's best action set pieces and QTEs.



## THE WALKING DEAD

[skybound.com](http://skybound.com)

→ Telltale's best known adventure is still an impressive piece of interactive fiction, even if the puzzles ain't great. The real headscratchers come when you have to figure out how to keep everyone alive, agonising over conversations and making stressful split-second calls.



## STORIES UNTOLD

[nocodestudio.com](http://nocodestudio.com)

→ A celebration of horror, text adventures and old tech, *Stories Untold* is unlike any other game, even as it's influenced by countless sources. It is novel and surprising, all while it revels in retro. Sitting in a room staring at an old machine has never been so unsettling.



## HER STORY

[herstorygame.com](http://herstorygame.com)

→ *Her Story's* premise sees you piecing together a story by watching interview footage of a single woman out of sequence, using keywords to find more clips. It's one of the best uses of FMV around, a fascinating mystery, and you won't want to leave your PC until you've solved it.





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IT'S ALL OVER...

# CLAN PCG

Can you match the PC Gamer team member to their *Diablo 4* character?  
It's literally 23 seconds of fun!



KASSIANI (NECROMANCER)



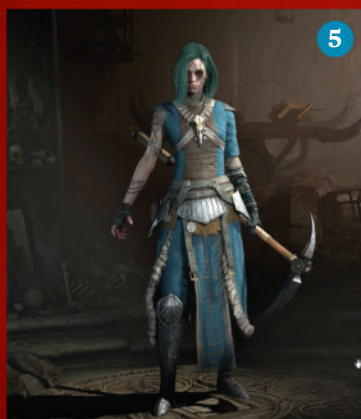
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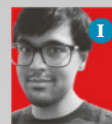
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# SHADOWS — OF DOUBT —

